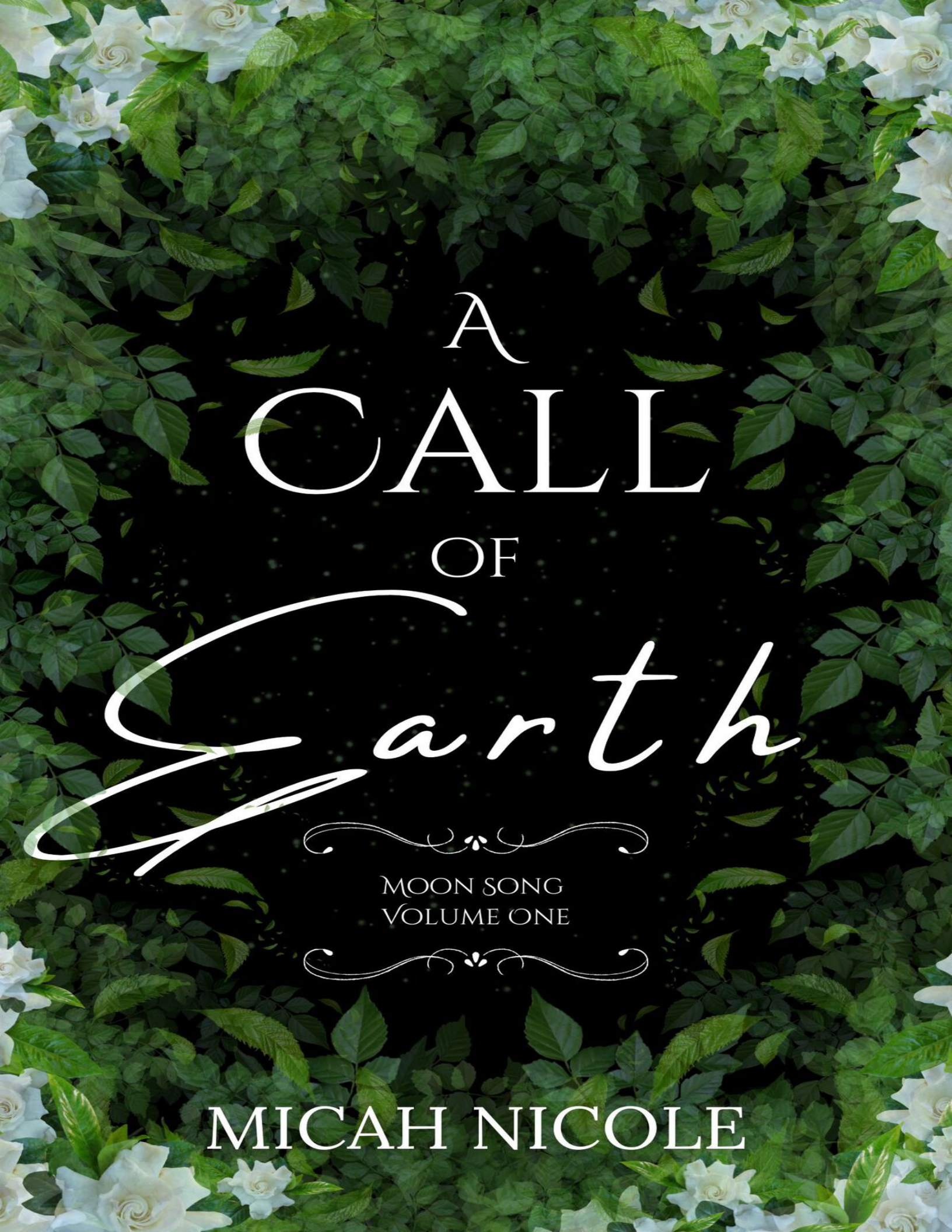
A
CALL
OF
Earth
MOON SONG
VOLUME ONE
MICAH NICOLE

A CALL OF EARTH

MOON SONG

BOOK ONE

MICAH NICOLE

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A Call of Earth

A Moon Song Novel

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For my parents.
Sometimes, simple words are enough.
I love you.

And for the ones who have spent their lives thinking something was wrong with them—there's not.
You cannot be satisfied by this life, alone.

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CONTENT WARNING

A Call of Earth is a why choose, dark fantasy romance. As this story is centered around a heroine who is taken captive, the very premise is dubious, and the circumstances are harrowing.

This story contains subject matter that may be triggering, including the following: dubious consent, adult language, death, graphic violence, war, rape, attempted sexual assault, drug and alcohol use, mental and emotional trauma, sexual content, and overall dark themes.

Reader discretion advised.

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MOON SONG IMMERSIVE PLAYLIST

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GLOSSARY

Above: A realm where demons reside, characterized by fire, lava, and buildings carved into rock.
Aer: Air.
Angel: Creatures that reside in the Above, with white wings and an ethereal allure.
Aqua: Water.
Below: A realm where angels reside, characterized by white, puffy clouds and land masses that float in the sky.
Body magic: Magic that can allow for one to read and control the intricacies of the body.
Demon: Creatures that reside in the Below, with incredibly enhanced strength. Can wield Body or Spirit magic, and some can wield both.
Dominium: Adult. One over the age of 100.
Fae: Creatures with the ability to harness the power of Aer, Terra, Aqua, Ignis, Luna, or Solis. Characterized by arched ears and appearances that align with their power.
Fallen: Banished angels that reside on the Fallen Isles. Characterized by black wings.
Fate: Creatures that appear as skeletons and beings of legend that have been thought dead. Weave lines of prophecy and fates.
Heirus: Child/underage. One under the age of 100.
Ignis: Fire.
Latrunculi: Game of brigands (chess).
Luna: Moon.

Mage: Offspring of demons and fae, characterized by arched ears, with most having magically-imbued tattoos. Can typically harness one fae power and one demon power, but more powerful mages have wider control and abilities.
Mind magic: Magic that can allow for one to read and control the intricacies of the mind.
Prima: A term of prestige bestowed upon the most powerful known mage.
Rys: The name for the hallucinogenic drug that comes from the petals of the Zarys plant.
Saga: Term of respect for Dominium female.
Sage: Term of respect for Dominium male.
Shifter: Creatures that can shift into beasts.
Silva Noctis: A pocket realm that has gateways everywhere, home to the wraiths.
Solis: Sun.
Spirit magic: Magic that can allow for one to read and control the intricacies of the spirit.
Sprite: Creatures with the elemental powers of Aer, Terra, Aqua, or Ignis. Small and harmless. Usually reside in places where their element is prominent.
Tenebrae: Darkness.
Terra: Earth.
Umbra: Shadow
Vampire: Creatures with a thirst for blood and Mind magic they can use to break into the minds of their victims to compel them.
Vetus: Ancient. One over the age of 500.
Vincire: Bond
Wraith: Creatures made of shadow that reside in the Silva Noctis. They consume power.

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PART I

STOLEN

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PROLOGUE

The season in which life as Luella Eritrais knew it ended, it was cold and dreadfully bleak.

The day had started off rather unassuming.

She had awoken in her usual, languorous morning routine. Body stretching over cool silk sheets as the hem of her slip tickled the bare skin on her thighs. The air was chilly, bordering on too cold in this time of changing seasons, where the gold-hued vestiges of fall tried dearly to keep hold over the land.

Luella had risen and donned her favorite pale rose robe. The end brushed against the floor with every step she took. Bare feet padded along the chilled tiles like a caged animal or some forgotten, locked-away thing as she paced.

It seemed to never end.

The pacing, the sighing, and the longing. A trinity of heartbroken actions, beget by the circumstances of her life. Locked away in her lonesome tower, withering like a flower or decaying like the ruins on the far edges of her home, the fae kingdom of sunlight, Solis—ruins she used to enjoy roaming around in her youth, a play-pretend sword of fire-forged glass clutched in one fist, a book in the other.

Luella used to parry and knock about on the ruinous scape of old towers and crumbled structures, bare feet—much like her own now—lithely dancing across the rough surfaces, leaving scratches and bloody sores. She couldn’t have cared less back then. Now, even at the threat of an imperfection marring her body, her engrained teachings caused her to wilt

further. No imperfections should mark her skin, no impurities or shortcomings. Anything less than proper and perfect would not do.

As the sole Princess of Solis, Luella strived to be as her namesake entails, a demure princess raised high above and kept safely away. Untouched and unmarred by the things in this world her many tutors said would be ruinous for a soft-hearted heirus fae such as herself.

No longer was Luella permitted to play a pretend game of a soldier warding off some nameless foe; instead, she saved these fantasies for her reading. Though she was forced to parade about in the highest quality of silks and play the role of a couth princess, she filled her empty days and long silences with adventures of great peril.

Love stories and war stories alike. Sometimes, both were found in between pages of the same book. She relished the time tucked away, even further from the reality of life.

The night prior, Luella had fallen asleep in the middle of one such novel, face pressed against ink-stained pages as her delicate fingers had curled into the leather spine, nestled between plush throws and memories of escape to some foreign land.

Dreams had been wild and fleeting.

Even now, Luella struggled to wrap her hands around the distant feeling they had brought. Good or bad, she was unsure.

Her brain was still littered with the mere impression of the images she had seen in her dreams. Hazed scenes of warm fire and soft touches—comforts she would never have.

Sometimes, Luella wished she would simply die in her sleep. To fall victim to dreams would have been a much better fate than the one that awaited her in her future.

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1

THE BEGINNING

A lonesome sigh fell from Luella's lips as she twiddled the end of her quill between her fingers. The steady motion of the tip pricked the very end of her littlest finger, like a constant reminder of the mantra that pounded within her head: *I hate it here.*

Here, being the four walls of the tower which kept her caged like a bird that desperately wished to fly free.

The tutoring room in which she sat and tried, in vain, to drown out the sound of her ill-tempered tutor droning on and on. Where the stout and pinched-faced female spoke of wifely duties and regal obligations, Luella's mind stayed preoccupied with the vast world outside the stone walls of her gilded cage.

Thoughts of the war brewing in the far reaches of the continents stirred within her brain.

She had been safe for most of her life, thank the gods. But with every passing day and every battle growing closer and closer, closing in on either side of her kingdom with growing fervor, Luella knelt on her knees each night, beseeching the gods to keep her safe. Even if they were fictitious gods, as her mother would claim.

In times of trial and tribulation, sometimes all it would take is the thought of some omnipotent and omniscient presence to soothe the soul and bring peace. Nonetheless, some small, niggling voice in the furthest spaces

of her mind wondered what it would be like if everything was, in fact, upended. Changed.

Would it be for the better or the worse?

Luella was jolted from her thoughts by the thick thump of a heavy tome slamming against her desk.

"Princess Luella." The stern voice caused her to inwardly cringe away.

Far too many times, that voice had been the precursor to swats against the backs of her hands. Or even worse, a word to her parents, the King and Queen of Solis. The King, known for his ruthlessness in his rule, was an even more stern and tempestuous father.

And her mother…

Luella didn't even want to begin to sift through the feelings she had for the female.

The Queen of Solis was always cold and harsh, staying out of the light Luella imagined she rightfully should have stepped into as the Queen. The female had always preferred to defer to Luella's father in all things. Even going so far as to teach her daughter the same—to live a deferential life in subservience to her future husband.

Never mind that Luella's parents wouldn't even allow her to pursue anyone. They had threatened her away from the notion on more than one occasion.

Recalling her father's white-knuckled grip on his fork many years ago, Luella thought of the time she had brought up the son of one of her fae lineage tutors. A kind, young male, who at the time, she revered with a starry-eyed gaze and blossoming hopes—hopes which were quickly dashed when her father called the tutor into the dining room and drove the prongs of his fork into the back of the male's hands. The sound of his startled scream still followed Luella into her dreams some nights.

However, she admitted she had much worse materials for her nightmares than that particular instance.

Luella cleared her throat to dispel the thoughts inside her mind, her spine straightening and shoulders rolling back, just as she had learned in her etiquette lessons.

Her tutor pursed her thin lips, a line between her brows showcasing her displeasure as she said, "I expect you to pay heed in these lessons. Or else your father will have to get involved."

The rasping lilt of her words caused Luella’s stomach to clench with anxiety and fear.

"Yes, Saga," Luella replied, lowering her head, eyes downcast as she took care to refer to the female just as any heirus would, with the title of respect for her gender.

It mattered little that Luella was the Princess of Solis; as an herius, her body was not hers, and her every word and action should be for the pleasure of those around her.

The fae were immortal—just as every other being besides the humans—and with some living up to a millennium, titles of reverence were held very dear to the fae, not at all alike the other creatures. Like shifters or demons, who didn’t place quite as much import on titles and propriety.

The fae were an old and orderly species, adhering closely to a strict set of rules. With their temples devoted to the gods, most fae were deeply religious, and the religion had been forced upon Luella from the very moment of her birth, just as all the political games and court meetings. She sometimes longed for the wild and untempered nature of the shifters. She had read stories that they freely mingled with the humans, and some even mated with them.

The strict nature of the fae was wholly at odds with the other species, and Luella was unable to flee from the cage in which she was trapped.

"Very well." The tutor sniffed, turning her back to Luella as she once more prowled across the length of the study, the quiet tapping of the soles of her shoes against the stone floor the only sound to break up the otherwise somber aura of the room.

With the tutor’s back to her as she scribbled notes on the black expanse of writing board tacked to the roughened stone walls, Luella quickly glanced outside, eyes roving over the dreary overcast. From the barest cracks of the tall, arched windows in the room, the long, thick, velvet curtains fluttered from the force of the winds. The insignia of Solis—a perfect circle with a small dot in the middle—was etched into the fabric of each curtain. Luella pulled the sleeves of her white knit coat over her hands. The material was thicker for the colder months quickly approaching, but it still did little to stave off the bitter chill seeping into the castle.

It had been like that for almost a month now. Not even were they at the start of winter, and Solis was already seeing some of the worst weather that had been documented in almost a century.

Luella didn’t mind it. She didn’t mind much, really. So long as she had her books and at least one plush fur to wrap around herself at night, she was okay. Luella found herself longing to crawl into her bed for the evening and steal away, but she knew it would be many more hours of teaching before she could even begin to entertain the idea.

Shifting on the wooden bench, she traced her fingers on the oak surface of the desk. She allowed the tutor’s words to wash over her, mind anywhere but there.

"It’s been not quite two decades since Luna was overthrown." At the name of the kingdom on the opposing side of the continent to Solis, Luella’s head perked up, and she paid closer attention to the tutor’s words.

"No one knows how, exactly, the current King of Luna so easily overthrew the prior monarchy, but, as you know, the power shift has taken a great toll on the trading and economy. At least three-quarters of the world’s silver originates from the mountains of Luna, and with Solis now having propriety on the precious metal demand with our gold, we control the majority of income and outcome flow to the remaining fae kingdoms, as well as Medius… And why is that?" The tutor snapped the end of her teaching stick against the board with a sharp *thwack*.

The answer came easily to Luella. It was not as though she had anything other to do than study or read. She often studied for pleasure, soaking up every word of the world with voracious focus.

Luella cleared her throat, fearful to answer, even though she knew she held the correct one. "It is… because Medius has the highest population density of humans in all the lands, comprised of over ninety percent, and they use the metals for w-weapons crafting and smithery." She stumbled over her words under the intense weight of her tutor’s attention, flinching back when the female started forward as if to swat the back of Luella’s hands.

The tutor weighed the quill tip of a writing instrument in her hands, corners of her mouth downturned as she regarded Luella, almost as though she were begrudgingly accepting her answer. Trying to find a flaw somewhere tucked between the words but unable to find one error, she settled merely on huffing under her breath, once more turning her back to Luella as she wrote furiously on the board. Her blonde hair flowed down her back, swaying slightly from the force of her intense writing.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted the tutor, and she turned, scowl etched even deeper into the sets of her cheeks. "What is it?" The tutor huffed.

The door creaked open, and Luella curiously watched as one of her lady’s maids peeked her head inside, a soft crown of blonde hair curling around her temples and falling over her slim shoulders.

"Saga, the King requested I ready the Princess for dinner."

Luella felt herself tense at the maid’s words. She wasn’t ready to face her parents yet. She was often called to dinners when her father wanted to punish her for some reason. While Luella’s mother just sat there, a complacent look on her face as she pretended nothing was amiss in her perfect little bubble.

She waited for the Saga’s dismissal before she stood. Luella had learned her lesson far too many times to act out of turn now.

"Very well, you’re dismissed." The tutor placed the quill back on her oak desk, barely looking at Luella as she started to stack books and put away empty scrolls. "I want you to write a script on the political advantages of the current King of Luna and his overtaking of the monarchy and the effects on trading. Due by tomorrow’s eve. If it is not on my desk, I’ll be having a word with your father."

Luella stood. Her long, maroon skirt fell over her thighs and fluttered about her ankles from the crispness of the wind gusting into the room.

"Yes, Saga." Luella bowed her head, feeling the terse weight of the tutor’s beady eyes boring into the top of her skull.

"Come." The lady’s maid beckoned her forward with the wave of her hand.

And Luella had no choice but to follow. Never, did she have a choice.

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2

LITTLE BIRD

Luella gritted her teeth against the pull of the hairbrush against her scalp, her eyes closing involuntarily from the rough treatment of the lady's maid.

She would think as the Princess that she would be treated with dignity and grace, but never had she been granted such luxuries. Her parents made sure of that. She was torn down at every possible step, beaten, and broken in spirit and mind. Her room was a cold place, with not many personal effects contained within the circular perimeter of stone walls, other than a bookshelf, stuffed to the brim with some of her most treasured stories but mostly containing books of study. Her bed, pushed against the far wall, with a cozy fur blanket taken from the hide of some lower level beast, tossed haphazardly in the middle of the worn mattress, covered with a smattering of pillows—the fae loved creature comforts—and the vanity in which she was currently sitting.

A wide, arched, golden mirror displayed her frazzled state. She regarded herself with apathy. Swollen lips from the terrible habit of anxiously biting them. Reddened cheeks, flushed from the cold, with not much to help ward off the chill. A thick, silken dressing gown wrapped around her slim frame.

Her golden hair was frizzy, some of the stray strands catching the dimming light of the sun, casting a halo of warmth around her delicate features. High cheekbones, but slightly rounded with youth. Her mother told her in the many years of looming immortality that her features would

only sharpen, just as her power should have—if Luella had any. A fact she was unable to ever admit aloud, the echoing chasm within her, where she should have been able to close her eyes and feel the roaring of the burning sun within her soul and call the magic to her hands, Luella felt only absence. Emptiness, blackness. Worse than feeling nothing at all, she felt worse than nothing. A screaming void stared at her in the face, pleading to be put out of its misery.

Startling golden eyes stared back at Luella as she met her own gaze.

She had often been told her eyes were far too vibrant and golden to resemble the trademark hushed yellow hues of the Solis fae. But what did she know? Solis fae were notorious for keeping to themselves, much more closed off than the other five fae kingdoms—Luna, Aer, Terra, Aqua, and Ignis.

Solis was a kingdom pushed to the furthest reaches of the fae kingdoms conglomerated on the western side of the continent, butting up against Medius on the eastern expanse, which made an ample way of trading with the humans, she had learned in through her studies.

But in true Solis fashion, any mingling with any other species, most especially humans, was highly frowned upon. Luella's only scope of perspective of the kingdoms and geography was from the maps she was supplied, but to her limited expanse of knowledge, Solis was the smallest of the fae kingdoms; though, this was not attributed in any sort to the kingdom's might. Of all the fae kingdoms, Solis was the most ruthless.

It had always seemed particularly odd to her that fae of the glowing, golden sun would be so cruel and dark in nature.

Luella rocked her heels against the wooden slats at the bottom of the stool, toes etching imaginary patterns into the frigid floors. She yearned for a rug or plush throw of some kind to steel herself from the air, growing thicker with a heavy weight and colder with the fast-approaching night.

It was like the very air had sentience. She could feel tendrils of wind brush against her cheeks as if in a lover's caress. The smell of salt water drifted to her from the open windows. The sea pounded against the rocks outside, and with every roaring crash of the waves beating against the rocks, Luella imagined herself falling into the ocean's depths. Into darkness and oblivion.

"The Queen left a dress for you. I laid it out on the bed," her lady's maid said—a meek and usually quiet female.

Luella did not know her name. Mother and Father never allowed her to know the names of the servants, not after she found companionship and solace in some.

"Thank you," Luella said softly, forcing a smile to her bitten lips. She didn’t refer to her as Saga, as Luella knew the maid was an heirus as well.

The evidence of the maid’s youth was in her features, just as all heirus appeared, and the dim crackle of sunlight sparked on the maid’s fingertips when she thought no one was looking, weaving webs of dawn light in the rays that filtered in through the tall, thin windows above. A weaker power, as seen in the heirus. With age, power grew. But Luella did not have any, so where others would grow in power and strength, she would remain the same, unchanging forever.

In the mirror, Luella watched as the maid tended to her, lips downturned and features pinched like she was scared of making too much noise and drawing attention to herself. She knew the feeling well.

The hairbrush made a dull sound as the maid set it on top of the vanity’s surface, combing fingers through the strands of Luella’s curls. Uncapping a vial of oil and spreading it on her hands, the maid gently combed through the ends of Luella’s hair, smoothing the errant strands, which were rarely able to be successfully tamed for long, even with the best of beauty products.

The scent of the lavender and chamomile oil relaxed her, and she inhaled deeply, the scent like warm summer and soft freedom.

Her eyes fluttered shut from the motions of the maid’s hands soothing against her scalp. She felt like she could fall asleep.

It was over far too soon, the sound of the oil being recapped. A quiet *snick* in the room. Then, the soft brush of fingertips over the small collection of face paints and rouge that adorned the back portion of the vanity. All gifts from Luella’s mother.

"Part your lips," the maid instructed.

Luella obeyed, mouth parting, and she cracked her eyelids regarding the maid as she mixed a pot of red paint with another oil—this one thicker and glossier than the one she had applied to Luella’s hair. The maid lifted a short brush; the ends were softly bristled. It tickled the corners of Luella’s mouth as she gently brushed against the cushion of her lips.

The smell reminded her of the sugar-crusted apples she used to steal from the cook in her youth. It was pretty. A glistening red that disguised the

chapped, bitten corners

The maid placed her hands on Luella’s shoulders, urging her to stand.

"All done," she said, still not looking Luella in the eyes. "Would you like me to help you dress, Princess?"

Luella shook her head. "No, thank you. I can manage on my own."

The maid nodded quickly before gathering up a few of her things, leaving the room just as quietly as she had swept inside of it.

Now alone, Luella sighed. She padded to her bed, the length of her long, silken robe brushing against the floor. The chill pebbled the pale flesh of her arms, and she wrapped them tightly around herself, staring at the silver material of the dress laid atop the furs of her bed.

Silver spun into a beautiful costume, but it would not distract from her sorrow. Her parents thought they could ply her with dresses and hair oils, but none of it did a thing to soothe the unbearable ache of loneliness and unrest inside of her.

A sigh puffed from her rouged lips as she ran a curious finger of the weave of silk. It was tailored to tightly to hug the slight curves of her frame and enhance the dip and flare of her waist and hips. The neckline stretched low. Much lower than she would have been comfortable with, but her mother never took into account her comfort, only appearances—no matter that few ever saw her outside of those inside the palace.

Just as she started to shrug off her robe, she heard a faint tapping noise from the window. Luella started, wide golden eyes looking over to the open arches of the window. The sun was slowly slipping from the horizon as it gave way to the startling brilliance of the moon. Wispy clouds dotted the approaching darkness, a few stars already twinkling, and Luella noted the faintest orange on the horizon, a soft burst mingling with the vibrant purple of twilight.

But that wasn’t what captured her attention.

No, the sight of a rather large raven perched on the windowsill caused her mouth to part in shock. She pressed a cold hand against her heart.

The bird was magnificent. Feathered wings, so black they were almost blue, and a beak that was pointed and grand. Sharply dangerous and wildly beautiful.

Deep blue eyes, like daggers piercing into her soul. The look reminded her of the one her tutor had given her earlier, but where that look had caused Luella to shrink back in fear and shame, this one made her melt and

flourish all at once. Like ice set in the sun to thaw, but not gone completely, just changed into flowing water that would drift into gulleys and spill into rivers and oceans.

Transmutated, not dead.

Taking care not to spook the raven into the night from wherever it came, she tiptoed closer. Arched soles lightly dancing across the hard surface of the floor, and the hem of her robe brushed against her ankles. The deep cut of her neckline slipped off of one shoulder, and she gathered her hands close to her chest.

"Hello," she breathed.

Lifting a hand from where it had been tucked against her heart, the sleeve of her robe slipped further. She paid it no mind and reached out. Beckoning the creature forward or asking it to stay, she was unsure. "Where did you come from?"

Her playful scoff filled the quiet room, and she shook her head, like she had been expecting an answer.

The only one she received was a flutter of wings as the raven shifted, dark blue eyes never leaving hers. Not for a moment.

"Are you hungry?" Luella inquired.

She looked to her nightstand, a half-eaten apple and a thin slice of buttered bread resting on a platter one of her servants had brought earlier. She tore a small piece from the bread, crumbs falling onto the bare, stone floors. "Here."

Luella offered the crumbs, moving closer to the windowsill. The raven didn’t move. If she didn’t know any better, she would assume it had been a statue of some kind, not a living, breathing thing.

Wind gusted through the window, causing the bird’s wings to lift as if preparing to take off in flight to some unknown place. A chill overcame her, her nipples hardening against the silk of the dressing gown. She stayed, staring at the bird, awaiting its next move.

When the raven didn’t accept the meager peace offering, she laid it on the edge of the windowsill, backing up to watch, but it didn’t move, and neither did she.

They were locked in a game of wills. Who would look away first? The heirus with the magicless soul or the raven with intelligent eyes?

It looked like the raven wasn’t going anywhere, so she turned to dress.

Luella slipped the shoulders of her dressing gown off her arms. Her bare skin was made to appear pale white under the rays of moonlight as it rose higher in the sky. So pale that it could mimic the very moon itself. But in reality, her skin held a dull tan, fainter than most Solis fae. She caught a glimpse of her body in the vanity's arched mirror. The swell of her breasts, small curve to her hips, and the naked expanse of her stomach and thighs. The little smudge of a white birthmark on her upper right thigh.

She looked over her naked shoulder to the bird still perched on the windowsill, taunting her silently with wings that could take it anywhere while she was trapped.

The raven was a startling backdrop to the imagery. The stark black of the feathers, lit by the moonlight and the endless night sky, and Luella's untouched skin and golden hair.

She lifted the dress, cocking a hip as she contemplated how to don the material. Stepping into her silken panties, the thin, white material barely covered her hips. Her mother's doing, no doubt. She left the brassiere on the bed. There was no need for it with this dress.

Instead, she stepped into the cool silk of the shift. It fell to her upper thighs, and two strings kept the material pulled against her chest. The swell of her breasts pushed against the pale fabric. The back was entirely open, no doubt a stylistic choice to coincide with the fashion of the gown. Lifting her leg to step into the gown, she pulled it up over her hips, where it fit snuggly.

A perfectly made suit of armor to withstand the cruelest of jabs from her parents.

She turned to the mirror in the corner of the room, twisting as she watched the way the silken fabric rippled around her waist. The back was practically non-existent, baring her pale skin.

It was far too cold for a gown like this.

She sighed again, and a soft caw made her head jerk to the raven. It eyed her curiously, and words stuck to her throat. She swallowed and turned back to her reflection, the raven barely visible in the background, where it nearly blended with the sky.

Golden hair, perfumed and tamed with lavender and chamomile oils, cascaded down her back and over her shoulders. The front of the dress was a soft scoop, revealing her elegant collarbones, free of jewelry.

Luella sighed. "Another night."

Shaking her head, she turned away from the mirror, unable to stand looking at herself any longer.

"I can do this. Just be quiet. Smile," she reminded herself.

Luella gathered the skirts of her gown in her hands and headed to the door. One hand braced against the knob.

Something inside her begged her to turn and look back at the window.

Just once, she thought.

The raven was still perched upon the stone lip of the windowsill. The singular marble pot resting alongside it held a golden yellow flower, the only stitch of color in the otherwise monochrome image of the raven standing as sentinel against the night.

Her rouged lips curled up in a half-smile. At least something cared about her enough to not leave her alone.

She would give anything for companionship—for someone to *care*—even if it was a raven.

Before Luella descended into the awaiting maw that stretched below the stairs into the heart of the castle, she gave a small wave, whispering, "Goodbye, little bird."

Maybe the raven would still be there when she got back.

A deep breath, holding it for a moment, counting off as the seconds passed. Luella steeled herself before she opened the double doors that led into the dining room. Just before she felt her lungs seize from lack of air and her throat tighten in desperation, she exhaled slowly.

She forced the held breath out… then inhaled once more, greedily sucking in air. The calming act quelled the consternation within the depths of her stomach.

The doors gave a loud and echoing groan as she pushed them open, a sound that bounced off the cavernous ceilings of the stone halls. Neither her mother nor her father stood as she walked inside. Her father glanced up, a quick once-over with his darkly shining eyes. It gave Luella a different kind of chill compared to the one felt from the cold.

Her mother just continued cutting into her baked loaf of bread, knife squealing against the plate with every sharp cut.

Luella gulped.

"You’re late," her mother snapped. Her eyes were downcast, but Luella knew the exact shade of amber-brown that they held, the same as her father, but his were a more pronounced gold.

Her mother’s bright gold hair was up today, a dramatic sweep off her nape held together with a litany of pins and baubles.

"I’m sorry, Mother." Luella made sure to soften her voice as she spoke, hoping to appeal to any gentleness. She wasn’t sure why they had called her to dinner, but she felt her hands shake as she pulled out a chair, sitting as gracefully as she could manage with the fear kindling inside her.

Luella tucked one ankle under the other as she sat. Her spine was as stiff as a board.

Her father laid his heavy gaze on her, and without any hesitation, he stated, "We’re sending you away."

Her heart stopped at his words.

"What?" she breathed.

He brought a bite of roasted meat to his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. Luella felt herself shrink under the judgment in his stare.

His golden blonde hair was pushed away from his temples, and his face was without lines of age, though he was old and powerful. A vetus, a fae over the age of five hundred. Her mother, who looked not much older than Luella—but with sharper cheekbones and wider hips—was still a dominium, the collective term for the Saga and Sage denotation.

"You’re to go to Syreni," her father continued. "The ship will be leaving tomorrow at dawn. We’ve already had a place prepared for you." His tone brooked no argument, and Luella knew better to contest his word.

But confusion quickly overtook her rightful fear. "What?" Luella breathed. "Why…"

Syreni was an island off the coast of the eastern side of the continent. Mostly the mer, sirens, and aquatic shifters resided in Syreni, but the island was also known as a place for summer-tinged debauchery. Under the hot sun and in the scorching sand, anything was game there.

The thought of going to such a place filled her with dread. She couldn’t comprehend how her strict Solis parents would willingly send her to a land known for its openness in all things salacious.

"It’s for your own good." Luella heard her mother’s soft voice interject.

The Queen had put down her fork, and her hands were folded demurely over her lap. Luella subconsciously felt herself mirroring her mother’s posture.

"But *why*?" Luella couldn’t help but ask again.

"Serpentis and Nix are ramping up their attacks. We have reports Medius is increasing aid. They mean to end us," her father proclaimed. "Their troops have been rallied and are set to march on the far villages of Medius. Our scouts believe they’ve reached out to Aqua and Terra for aid. Aer and Ignis are too close to us to retaliate or offer assistance. They’re the smarter of the bunch… We need you safely away from here before we have to get involved. Your mother will be following in a few days, and I’ll be staying here to command the army if needed."

His words were like a punch to Luella’s gut, and she felt that familiar weight of anxiety simmer anew. She knew she couldn’t combat his decision, not if she valued the scant amount of freedom she was offered.

Luella inwardly scoffed at the thought. What freedom? Reading the books that she wanted or being awarded warm blankets for the winter months?

At least her father and mother have never physically hurt her. They kept their attacks geared toward the mental sort, but the King spared no expense in harming others on her behalf and forcing her to watch. She didn’t want to be held accountable for the servant currently filling their wine glasses to lose a hand in her father’s ire, so Luella held her tongue.

"You’ll leave your possessions here. Take only enough clothes to last the voyage. We’ve sent servants ahead to ready the estate." Her father pushed away from the table, apparently done with the meal and giving orders.

He turned to leave without another word, even knowing he wouldn’t see her for the foreseeable future. He trailed a finger along the back of her mother’s neck as he left. A shiver wracked her mother’s frame. In a way, Luella pitied her for being married to such a monster, but monsters tended to keep company.

Luella wasn’t sure if villains were made or born, but somewhere along the way, her mother had grown to be as monstrous as her father. She just did a better job at hiding it under the guise of opulence.

Her mother, at least, had the decency to bid Luella farewell as she stood. "I’ll see you in a few weeks." And with that, she left the room. Her golden

gown flowed behind her, heels clacking against the stone floors, growing fainter and fainter with each step.

Luella sighed deeply, shoulders slumping as she rested her face in her hands. Hair tickled her arms as she leaned forward.

Her future was always decided for her. She never had a say in anything.

What she wore and what she ate, evident in the roasted chunk of meat sitting untouched on her plate, even though she hated eating meat. The glossy glaze had congealed against the golden platter, and Luella looked at it in disgust. She leaned across the table to nab her mother's untouched wine glass.

The dark red liquid inside created a little whirlpool as she swirled the aromatic liquid around and around, deep in thought. She worried for the innocents caught in the crossfire of this war. Greedy rulers, desperate for power and land. She worried for those forced to fight in a war no one wanted, all used as pawns in some grandmaster's game as they carelessly toyed with fate and lives.

Luella took a small sip of the wine, the liquid immediately working to soothe the tempestuous storm of feelings inside her.

The lip of the glass was stained maroon. The same shade that painted her lips and rouged her cheeks. She continued to drink, allowing the numbness to cascade over her. With the numbness came a dull sense of understanding. Her parents wanted what was best for her—or so they said. Even if it didn't seem like it. Sending her away was an act of protection. But she wished it wasn't so.

What would it be like to fight? To stay? To don real armor, instead of this fallacy of silk and jewels?

It was a peculiar thought, but Luella had it nonetheless:

What would it be like to fly free like that little raven that had landed on her windowsill?

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3

HAUNTED

Luella closed the door to her room firmly behind her. Her back sagged against it as she felt the weight that had pressed down on her relieve. Ever so slightly.

The dinner had gone well, compared to past dinners with her parents, at least. None of the serving staff had been marred or made an example of, and she was able to leave quietly, just as she wished she always could.

She wasn't sure how to feel about being sent away to Syreni. One part of Luella yearned to leave. Escape and never return. Discover the secrets held within the world and differing cultures and cityscapes and kingdoms and people. She itched for it all. But another part of her warred against those feelings, desperately hoping to make a stand for once in her nearly twenty years of being alive. The choice had been ripped away from her, though, with her father's decree.

As she prepared for bed, she glanced at the window, still open and letting in the cold, night air—it made her arms pebble with the frigid crispness wafting throughout the room—but no raven perched anywhere nearby. The windowsill was bare, save for the little golden flower. The petals shifted lightly in the breeze, and Luella tried not to feel dejected by the loss of the raven. If she had wings, she would fly free, too, and never be confined to one place.

The windows creaked as she closed them, but not all the way, though, leaving them open enough to give the room a fresh sense of openness,

letting in the salt air and faint sound of crashing waves against the ocean rocks below. A lullaby for sleep, no matter how restless it may prove to be. She dropped the dress away from her body, quickly disrobing the shift, a backward replica of her earlier dressing routine.

Now bare, save for the scant material of the silk around her hips, Luella padded to the small, wicker frame of her dresser that held a few sleeping gowns. It opened to reveal short dresses and gowns, all of varying colors. Some were lighter in fabric, and others thicker for the colder months. Her hands passed over the heavier weaves, heading straight for the light, airy gown that was almost translucent in color. Her favorite for sleep. She slipped the nightgown over her head. The material fell to barely cover the small rise of her hips and backside.

Luella never liked being confined with thick garments while sleeping; she much preferred to have an ever-present chill and wrap herself in countless furs and downy pillows. The air was brisk and frigid, and she couldn't wait to curl up and dream the night away.

The sharp air slightly stung her nose as she breathed in. Luella loved how it made her feel alive. It comforted her, as well.

The two straps of her nightgown were like the thin webbing of a spider's trap. Lace covered the bodice of the gown, and the material was a pale, white cotton, softer than the slip of some of her day shifts and gowns. Much more comfortable for sleep.

A small, golden flame flickered from the candle on the vanity. A servant must have been here earlier to light it. Luella bent over the flame, her golden hair falling slightly over the chilled flesh of her skin. Warm breath puffed from her wine-stained lips as she blew the flame out. Just before it was extinguished, she could make out the impression of the cloud of her breath floating in the air in front of her.

Now dark, the room seemed rather imposing, like she could pick out monsters emerging from the shadowy walls and hidden crevices.

Shuffling to the bed, Luella pulled back the thin sheet and slipped underneath for the night. The pillow was cold against her flushed skin, and the fur tickled her chin, where she had pulled it tightly around her body. Roaring and crashing waves were like a soothing lullaby.

She felt her eyes drift shut, darkness speckled with stars behind her lids, the only thing she could see as the overwhelming anxiety in her mind simmered—not completely gone, just shoved away for the night.

Luella would deal with it all in the morning.

All thoughts of voyages and war were banished, and instead, her mind began to conjure up images of crackling fire, illuminating some grand study in an unknown place. As her breath evened out and her limbs grew heavy, she fell willingly into her dreams. Mind falling, falling into oblivion, while her body stayed tucked safely into the warm cocoon of furs.

It was discombobulating. As though she could feel her soul slip out of her flesh and escape to some different realm as easily as she had slipped out of her dressing gown or into the silk sheets.

There one moment and gone the next.

She slipped into the escape that could only be found in her head.

From a cloud of wispy smoke and hazy night emerged a shadowed figure.

He drew closer while Luella stayed perched upon some hazy armchair. She could feel the leather underneath her bare thighs, the fire that warmed the tips of her toes where they curled into a plush throw thrown across the wooden floor.

She could *feel*, and she could *smell*, and she could *hear*. But she could not truly *see*.

Sight escaped her. Where there might have been the vision of intricately woven rugs and leather-bound copies of worn and tattered novels, she merely saw faint impressions of these things. Her mind couldn’t quite focus and grasped desperately onto the images, but they fell through her fingers like fine grains of sand. Unable to be held.

She had always had vivid dreams, but none so much as this.

The shadowed figure grew closer, kneeling in front of her.

Even in the dream, she could feel the firm weight of hands against her shoulders as they settled there. Not pulling or pushing, just resting in all their ghostly might, committing the slim shape of her frame to memory.

From the size of the shoulders and height—towering over her, even when kneeling—Luella could tell it was a male. A big one at that.

He was like a painting unfinished. With the edges blurred and features undone. She could make out dark hair, blended with the shadows, and large, strong shoulders, but everything else escaped her. When she tried to focus, it became even more blurred.

In this dream, Luella did not have cares or worries. Haunted by the things she wanted but could never have.

The male leaned closer to her, and the scent of spiced bergamot permeated her senses. Subtle and enticing, but something deeper and richer clouded the notes. If scents had colors, this would be scarlet. A rich and luxurious shade. The color of passion. Or blood.

His breath whispered over her skin, warming her cheeks. She closed her eyes, mouth parting involuntarily as she anticipated what the male would do.

"I'm waiting for you." The words were a quiet declaration in the hazy space of her mind.

Though she couldn't make out the sight of his eyes or the features on his face, one thing was startlingly vivid: his voice. It was crisp and deep. A perfect tenure. She imagined the voice whispering sweet nothings and flirtatious words, and a blush crept up on her cheeks.

Luella swallowed from the intensity.

The trance that had settled over her was broken as she distantly registered the soft caw of a bird. But there were none to be found in the dreamscape before her—the shadowy fire and looming bookcases stretched high above, and what Luella imagined were stuffed to overflowing with tomes and scrolls.

She closed her eyes, afraid to break this trance.

"I'm so sorry," the male whispered.

She wanted to ask, *What are you sorry for?* But Luella could not speak. She was left only to imagine what could make such a beautiful voice be tinged with such sorrow…

The male's presence disappeared just as subtly and unassuming as he had appeared. There one moment and gone the next.

Though her eyes were closed, she knew without a doubt if she looked, the male would not be there. He was gone, but she could still feel the ghost of his breath against her skin, and she lifted a hand, brushing it against her soft cheekbones. Fingers skimming across her face in an attempt to replicate his phantom touch.

The raven cawed once more. Luella cursed the creature for disrupting her dream.

If she opened her eyes, she wondered if she would awaken and see the raven perched once more on the windowsill. Or if the sound somehow haunted her even in her dreams, chased her where no one but herself may escape?

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4

THE SIEGE

Screams.

Loud, wailing screams.

Her eyes shot open. At first, Luella thought it was just a dream, that she was still deep inside her mind and not awake in reality.

A sharp stinging radiated from her neck, as her eyes focused on the dark room, she could make out a hulking shadow looming above her. Her head tilted back, and she felt the sharp point of a dagger dig further into her throat.

Fear froze her.

What was happening?

"You’re awake," the voice said. It was a male.

Luella tried to move backward as panic filled her lungs.

The male tsked. "I wouldn’t move if I were you. I was told to take you as a prisoner, but I’m sure he would understand if I’m driven to kill you if you act out and give me trouble."

"W-who are you?" Luella couldn’t stop herself from stuttering with terror.

Her teeth rattled, the dagger cutting into her neck as she felt the warm slide of hot liquid pool into the dip of her collarbone.

The male had cut her.

Screams from the halls outside sounded, their intensity unrelenting. A cacophony of yells that echoed in tune with grizzly laughter. The noises

were sick and villainous. Faintly, Luella heard one cry stand out over the others. A voice that sounded slightly familiar to her. Her lady's maid. Luella didn't even know her name, and she was most likely being killed or… *worse*.

Her screams seemed like death cries to Luella's ringing ears.

She wanted it all to stop.

This had to be a nightmare. A terrible, terrible nightmare. She was still sleeping, that was it. It had to be. There's no way this was really happening. Was there?

The shadow leaned over Luella, one knee pressed against the mattress, causing it to dip under his heavy weight. She leaned to the side, into him, and as his large body settled on the mattress, her bare leg was forced into touching his knee. The armor he wore felt stiff and unrelenting.

Leather.

The leather weaves that the army of Serpentis wear.

As allies of Medius, Serpentis and Nix used breastplates and fighting leathers, supplied to them by the craftsmen of Medius. The fae favored iron and metal suits of arms. Materials that were easily found in the mountains and quarries of each kingdom.

So, to feel leather armor in the midst of what appeared to be a siege could mean nothing other than Serpentis had attacked sooner than her father had anticipated. The scouts he had corresponded with could have been compromised, sharing falsified information to have the King's focus distracted, leaving Solis vulnerable and open to a surprise attack.

Luella felt her face drain of color, her attention on the singular focal point where her bare thigh touched the male's armored one. The dagger eased up ever so slightly. Imperceptibly, as if he didn't mean to grant her the reprieve she so desperately desired.

"What do you want from me?" Her voice was too breathy and soft, even to her own ears, and she watched as the glint of teeth was revealed in the male's face as he smiled at the fear in her voice. She sounded like a prisoner facing the gallows, resigned yet frightened to the marrow of her bones.

He traced the dagger down to her collarbone. No doubt chasing after the blood dripping. He caught it with the tip of the silver blade, placing a rough, gloved hand against her sternum as he released the dagger where it was poised over her. The male brought the blade to his face, scrutinizing the crimson drop that beaded along the silver tip.

"Don’t play dumb, *Princess*," the male sneered the title in mock respect. "You know what I want." He closed his eyes as he deeply inhaled the scent of her blood on the dagger. "Steel and iron." He breathed in raggedly, his voice a deep rumble that reverberated to where his hand was pressed against her chest.

"Please," she begged, voice thin with fear. She would have thought he hadn’t heard it if not for the satisfied pleasure on his shadowed face.

"Beg some more," the male leaned down to whisper harshly over Luella’s face. He smelled like freshly fallen snow, crisp and wintery, and that shouldn’t be so tempting… But it was. She breathed in, drawn to the alluring dangerousness of this male.

Luella squeezed her eyes shut. She *did* know what he wanted; she just didn’t want to admit it aloud.

It felt like she was still stuck in her dreams—a nightmare.

"The Solis fae have an artillery at their disposal. You don’t want to do this." She attempted to be diplomatic, feeling the years of her teachings coming to the surface. None of their teachings included how to reason with a deranged beast of a male who was threatening to kill you.

He chuckled, shifting his hand up to cup the base of her neck in a threat. He could snap the bones there with a mere twist of his large hand, and she would know no more. That quick.

She was utterly helpless.

"I don’t want to do this?" he taunted. "No, you’re wrong. I very much want to do this." He angled the dagger back against her neck, roughly grabbing her bare upper arm.

His grip was so tight that she winced. His fingers completely enclosed her arm. The male could ruin her with a single touch.

Luella was pulled away from the bed, the sheets falling away from where they were wrapped so tightly around her. Now standing, the male towered over her. She looked up, her head barely brushing his muscled chest.

"Come," the male growled.

He pulled her forward into his body. Through the haze of her shock, she was dimly aware of how scantly clad she was dressed. The nightgown barely covered anything; Luella might as well have been nude.

She roughly tried to free herself from the male’s vice-like grip, tugging her arm backward in vain. He merely doubled down with his grip. A soft

sound of protest was torn from her throat. She wished that she wouldn't have made such a sound of weakness. Monsterous creatures such as he didn't deserve to have the satisfaction of hearing her in pain. It would only fuel his ire.

From their location closer to the window, the moonlight illuminated the male's features, chasing away the jagged edges of darkness that had clouded his visage. His hair was stark white and long; some of the locks were roughly pulled back in braids. Threaded beads of dark copper weaved throughout the braids, and they mingled with the leather thong around his neck, brandishing a medallion embossed with some pattern or crest that she couldn't quite make out.

The telltale leather armor of the Serpentis and Nix army guarded his hulking frame. Dark pieces of thickly woven materials, concentrated on his chest and lower stomach, with shin guards and tightly wrapped pants, offering flexibility for combat. Twin longswords crossed over his back. The handles stuck out invitingly; their sheaths golden.

His appearance couldn't be more at odds with hers.

He looked the part of a roughened hunter. Tall and imposing and wicked. And Luella was a mere slip of a female compared to him. An heirus, still.

One of the straps of her nightgown fell down her shoulder, exposing the beginnings of the swell of her chest. Her bare thighs trembled from the rush of night air and adrenaline that flooded throughout her. Where her hair was golden and ears delicately arched, his hair was white, leeched of all color.

She could make out the tip of pointed ears peeking through his braids. That narrows the pool of what he might be. Perhaps a rogue fae, in league with the shifters or humans—or even a mage. As children of demons and fae, mages had the trademark arched ears of their fae ancestry. And the wicked intent of their demon counterpart.

The mages were deadly and known for being more than a little unhinged. With their elemental powers and brute strength, they were unmatched foes. No one wanted a mage as an enemy. And here she stood, with one perhaps looming over her, meaning to do unspeakable things with her.

Was it even worth it to fight? Luella thought.

Death might be better than whatever this male had planned with her.

With the power she could feel emanating off of this male in droves, he was something Luella didn’t want to mess with, this she knew with certainty.

The male freed one of his hands, pushing the hood of his cloak over his head. She watched as he dug into a pack on the side of his hip, pulling free a cloak matching his black one but smaller.

"Be still and quiet. Lest I take your tongue," he commanded.

Luella promptly closed her mouth and stopped any rebuttal that threatened to spill over.

She could wait. She could play his game. For now.

She had to. The alternative was death. Something she had contemplated before, but now that it was staring her in the face, she wanted nothing to do with it.

A constant stream of horror swept through her, growing with every passing moment.

She didn’t want to die…

The male pulled the cloak over Luella, completely covering her body. The end almost touched the floor. He roughly pulled the hood over her head, concealing her identity from anyone who may give her a second glance.

"Still too big," he commented under his breath, like he forgot she was even there. He fussed with the clasp, securing it more snugly with a pin he procured from his pouch.

He shoved her against the stone wall, and even through the thick material of the cloak, Luella could feel it as it raked against her lower back. He kept one of his thick forearms pinned over her chest, securing her tightly with his body weight. The echo of screams was unceasing. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, allowing herself to find a strange sort of solace within the nature of his embrace. The male radiated warmth, and it cascaded over her as she was forced to submit to his authority.

He waited for a beat. Then another. Listening for something unknown to her.

Her ears strained to pick up the sounds that echoed off the walls and bounced within the chasm of the castle. They reverberated up the circular staircase leading to her tower, calling her down to their midst.

She opened her mouth, a question poised on the tip of her tongue. But like he could feel the inhale of breath, signaling the start of words, the male

roughly forced a palm over her mouth, leaning into her. Their faces were a mere breath apart. Crisp, icy snow melted against her tongue as she inhaled.

"I said quiet yourself," he seethed.

Luella gulped under the weight of his attention. Her eyes shifted from his ice-blue gaze, unable to hold it for long. "If you value your limbs, follow me. I have no qualms about cutting a finger off to keep you pliant. Pain has that effect. After the screams subside, of course, but I brought a bit for a reason."

And with that, Luella fell utterly quiet. No more questions or even attempts to wince aloud. The male meant the threat. She could tell it in his wild gaze. His eyes were like none she had ever seen before. Brimming with violence. It was a different sort than the kind held in her father's golden eyes—where her father was passive and calculating, the beast that stood before her held a stare promising profane acts, an unnatural sort of cruelty. They roved over her cloak-laden form, taking in the way her shoulders bunched up close to her ears and her eyes shuttered in the beginnings of a full-bodied recoil.

She still had enough wits about her, in this fear-addled state, to wonder about her parent's safety.

Luella always knew she was at risk for harm, as the sole Princess of Solis, with her only purpose to be wed and used as royal breeding stock, it would be wise, from an adversary's perspective, to get rid of her or use her as a means of barter in this treacherous war.

It didn't mean she had to resign herself to this fate. She would follow this male's command and bide her time for escape.

He took the lead as he started for the stairs. His grip was an ever-present force against her upper arm. A finger reached out to press against her lip in one last warning, right before he creaked open the wooden door leading down below to the main halls of the castle. The screams grew louder. An incessant buzzing of death rattled breathing and pleas for mercy.

Her eyes tracked over the walls, a few errant splatters of blood painting the stone. It was hard to tell the exact shade in the dim light of the corridor, but it was unmistakable from the tang of iron that permeated the air like a heavy cloud of violence.

Luella's bare feet slipped against something wet. Blood.

She almost tumbled into the male but stopped herself with a hand against his lower back. The muscles were firm under her palm. A true

warrior’s physique.

As they descended further, she took note that all the sconces lining the walls had been extinguished. No light to be seen in this darkened hallway. Her eyes strained, shapes jumping out at her from the darkened recess. Shadows played with her fear. Every step taken was one of trepidation.

"Help me! *Please*."

The words echoed to Luella’s ears as they reached the bottom of the steps. The voice was feminine—high and strained, as if a last pleading call into oblivion.

A grand door stood before them, and Luella craned her head to see over the male’s broad shoulders. He waited, hands poised over the swirled, levered handles attached to the door.

A wet thud echoed, synonymous with a crackle of deep laughter and a cut-off cry. Her eyes burned with the threat of tears as her breath stuttered. Blood welled from the center of her lip with how hard she was biting down in an attempt to stifle a twin cry, mourning the life she knew was lost. The iron tang of blood grounded her.

Icy eyes glinted as the predator before her turned, tucking her head closer into the expanse of his chest. The male’s arm brushed the crown of her hood, pulling it tighter over her head, as he fiddled with his own cloak, pulling his dark hood over his hair, obscuring the white, braided hair that would act as a beacon in the darkly shadowed halls.

They both appeared as wraiths, skeletal figures who lurked in the shadows of the feared Silva Noctis, cloaked in darkness with dripping maws of jagged teeth. You didn’t know they were upon you until it was too late.

And this stranger was as deadly as a wraith as he prowled the halls. With his bulging muscles and hardened figure, she knew he would be the victor in a fight.

This is what they were up against—they never even stood a chance…

The door groaned loudly as it creaked open. The hunter crept forward, urging Luella onward with his unyielding grip. Keeping her head tucked firmly into his chest, he shielded her eyes from the sights around, as one arm wrapped around her shoulder, the other brandishing one of the longswords on his back.

And just like that, Luella was led onward to her fate.

From the corners of her eyes, she saw a female in a rumpled, bloodied dress splayed on the ground. The hem of her dress was hiked up around her thighs, bloodied hands imprinted like tattoos on her skin.

Luella grew ill at the sight, nausea roiling her in her gut. Pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle the urge to expel her meager dinner—and wine—Luella pressed her nose into the male's chest, breathing in his refreshing snowy scent to ward off the fetid death that permeated the halls.

The female must have been an heirus—through the shadows, Luella saw a face softened with youth. Her eyes were half-lidded, staring at nothing. She was gone. Her soul somewhere… other.

Luella sent up a quick prayer to the gods. Perhaps the female will be welcomed warmly into the realm beyond with a maternal, comforting embrace.

Black tangles of hair fell around her neck, bent at an odd angle. Blood pooled from the female's mouth, and Luella could see white bone poking through her broken neck. Luella whimpered at the sight.

She couldn't stand it any longer. She pressed her face into her captor's chest, allowing him to lead her, stumbling after him, barely holding herself up under the crushing weight of grief and horror that clung to her like shadows. She felt a rumble under her cheek as if warning her away. Or urging her closer to him.

Still, Luella did not speak.

Silence came easy to her. As did the obedience. She spent her life tucked away and forced into compliance, after all.

A commotion down the hall sounded out, disrupting them from their quiet trek.

The hem of the male's hood brushed hers as he leaned down closer to her face. Blue eyes like the purest of ice pierced her as he warned, "Stay." Violence tinged his words.

Luella nodded, eyes wide. He released her with reluctance, switching his weapon to grasp it with two hands. The blade glinted in the darkness.

The male started toward the sound of the noises; a song of clashing swords and ordered yells of soldiers.

With his attention diverted, Luella slowly backed up.

One step. Two. He didn't notice her slowly slipping away. She froze, waiting for him to turn and direct the sword at her chest in retribution for

her disobeying his order to stay. Or even follow through with his promise to cut off her fingers or cut out her tongue to silence her.

But his focus was unwaveringly trained ahead of him.

Was it time to make her escape? She could find her parents. They could flee with their lives.

She waited with a trembling breath, legs quivering as she steeled herself. The male rounded the corner, and right before she lost sight of him, Luella chanced it.

A deep breath.

Spinning around before she could talk herself out of it, the soles of her bare feet hurriedly padded against the stone flooring, which quickly turned into marble as she entered the grand halls of the main entryway. The wind from her pace tangled her golden hair and blew back the sides of her cloak.

Heavy footfalls pounded behind her.

He was close.

But where the hunter was all brute strength and lethal force, Luella was lithe and coy. Her movements were precise. His, thundering and uncouth. For all his might as predator, she was the prey. Sometimes, there were advantages to being prey—to being small and wily.

Luella ducked down into a corridor. A small passage that led under the stairs to the network of mazes the serving staff used to go from one room to the next.

Her chest heaved in exertion, but she forced herself silent with a hand pressed harshly against her mouth. Eyes closed tightly, and head tilted back to press against the wall, she waited for the sound of the male's footfalls to pass her little nook, signaling she was in the clear.

Please, please, please, she begged.

She froze completely as she felt the quiet thrum with a presence. The male stopped right near where she was tucked inside the passage. She didn't want to back further up and risk alerting him with the movements, so she held her breath.

"Come out, come out, little Princess. It's not too late to come to me without punishment." The male was so close to her that she could almost reach out and touch the vibrations in the air from his angrily whispered words. "But the offer won't last for long." The taunt trailed off as he moved on, searching for her with fervor.

Held breath escaped her in a softly whistled *whoosh*.

Luella debated her next move, measuring the weight of staying put versus moving. Fear voiced an opinion of hunkering down onto the floor and giving up completely. But her soul screamed for vengeance, thinking of the herius, left to rot on the castle's floor. And the many others she did not see.

Her teeth ached from the force in which she clenched her jaw.

For those who had their choices ripped from them, Luella would fight. Because they could not, she shall.

Pulling the hood back on her head, her features were once more concealed.

Just as she used to dance over the ruins and play a pretend game of chase with her shadow, she now played a much more dangerous game. One of predator and prey. Hunter and hunted. Strong and meek.

In a mirror of her past, she lithely stalked across the rough-hewn stone. This time, not a memory of what once was a grand structure, her feet danced over the glory of the current monarchy.

She slipped out of her hiding spot and ghosted past a fluttering tapestry displayed proudly in the entryway to the castle. Two curved staircases led to either wing. The foyer in which she stood was littered with bodies, blood congealing on the floor. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. Passing by servants and soldiers alike.

It had become too quiet in the castle. The sounds of war and battle cries had died down, just as the souls who fought to protect this place and the innocents who were caught in the crossfire.

Luella was only an heirus, untrained in the art of battle. As much as she wished to seek revenge, she knew she could not. Not without giving her life in forfeit. She resigned herself to flee and search for survivors along the way.

Hope bloomed in her chest as she remembered that the boat could still be at the docks in just a few short hours, leading to Syreni.

The plan formed in her mind, giving her purpose: get to the docks and lay in wait until the ship arrived.

The moon grew lower and lower in the sky, as it was only a little while longer to the golden safety of morning. If Luella escaped, she could seek aid and get the ship's crew to send word to her father's scouts. There must be a plan in place for situations such as this. A coded message or keyword to alert them to what had happened.

With renewed hope fueling her, she altered her direction, now heading straight to the double doors leading to the gardens outside.

Maybe if Luella had been more cautious, she would have heard it. Or sensed it… If she wasn’t so overcome with fleeting hope, it could have turned out differently.

Before she had a chance to react, a hand was roughly placed on her shoulder, tugging the hood of the cloak back so harshly that she felt some of her hair rip free from her scalp from the force.

Luella let out a strangled yelp.

"Well, look at what we have here. We caught ourselves a princess, boys."

Her eyes landed on three males, all ragged and blood-soaked, with the leather armor of the enemy wrapping their lethal frames.

She stumbled back, hands closing around the air as she desperately wished for a dagger of some sort. Never mind that she couldn’t wield one if her life depended on it—which it did.

One of the males licked his lips, brushing a rough hand down his scraggly beard. His ears were rounded, but she caught a glimpse of wildness in his dark eyes.

He growled, "You don’t think the King would mind if we broke her in, do you?"

They all laughed, and her heart pumped furiously in her chest.

"Stay away from me," Luella commanded, but her voice shook, giving away the fright that gripped her.

"Oh, look," the one who caught her remarked. The male had red hair and a jagged scar that cut through his eye and up to his temple, leaving a mottled appearance in his pupil. "It speaks."

Her hands shook as the males surrounded her. Prowling closer and closer, closing in on each side. One at her back and two at each side.

Her eyes darted around the room, flitting across a few soldiers on the ground. A wicked, curved dagger lay haphazardly near the staircase. The blade was coated in thick, dark blood. It was deadly. If Luella could reach it, she might survive this.

One of the males followed where her eyes landed, a challenge sparking in the air as his lips curved up into a grin that was just as wicked and deadly as the dagger. "Fuck, I wanted a fight." A meaty hand reached down to… *adjust* his crotch, and Luella grimaced as the male groaned low. "It’s always

better when they fight back. It makes everything so much sweeter." Each word was punctuated by the slow steps of the male.

Luella shook, fingers flexing as she eyed the dagger.

It was either take a chance nabbing the blade or risk being at the mercy of these males. Either way, she was vulnerable.

"She’s mine." The red-haired male licked his lips, and with that, he lunged, jumping for Luella like a wild beast.

She dove for the blade, but it was no use. Kicking and screaming, she landed a weak punch between the male’s legs, scampering on her hands and knees for the blade.

He bent over with a groan, staring at her from a hunched-over position. "You’re dead," he seethed. "I don’t care what the King has to say."

Still scrambling for the blade—she refused to give up or give in—a punishing grip bruised her arms as she was hauled off of the ground like a mere sack.

The bearded male pulled Luella to stand, thick arms wrapping around her chest and forcing her to still. She squirmed in his grip, twisting and kicking out with her legs, but a hand against her chin turned her head up to the bearded male holding her hostage. He stuck his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply. His breath was hot and rancid, and Luella wanted to throw up. A shudder wracked her body as the male’s tongue flicked out, skimming wetly over the side of her neck.

"Please," she moaned, turning her head away as much as she was able.

The male holding her laughed. "*Please*," he mocked. Fingers roughly brushed over her cheekbones before the male remarked, "An heirus. Has to be. She’s a young one." His tone was contemplative and… *hungry*.

"Been a while since I had an heirus. They’re always the sweetest." The red-haired male leveled Luella with a cold stare, and the scar across his eye tugged at his brow as his face twisted with evil anticipation.

The grip holding her tightened to the point of crushing pain, and she yelped, her insides squeezing under the male’s unyielding grip. The red-haired male’s eyes roved over her body, lingering on her chest and legs. And before she could blink or flinch, he curled his fist and drove it into her stomach. A pained puff of air was torn from Luella’s lungs, and she curled over the male’s arm banding around her waist, a throbbing ache gripping her from the punch.

Her breaths were ragged as she tried to inhale; it was hard from her bent position and her sore lungs. It felt like the male had punched all the air out of her stomach from the force of the blow.

"Hold her down, Gunnar. I’m going first," he ordered the male with the beard—Gunnar—and his grip tightened even more on Luella’s arms before he threw her roughly to the ground.

"No!" she gasped, feeling like a spectator to her own demise as he knelt over her, ripping the cloak off of her body. The button skittered and clinked against the marble flooring.

The male’s eyes roved over every exposed bit of her. The thin, translucent cotton of her gown barely did anything to cover her shape. Luella lamented her choice of nightwear.

He pulled a knife from the sheath at his thigh, using it to cut a tear down the front of her slip. The jagged cut in the material stopped right at the center of her chest, the tip poised right over her pounding heart. She breathed in sharply and shallowly as she awaited the male to drive the knife into her chest and end it all.

Death would be a mercy at this point.

A strong hand gripped her upper thigh, and the male pulled her closer to him, dragging her over the gore-soaked marble floors. The bottom of her slip fell to her stomach as he parted her legs. She squeezed her eyes shut from the exposed position. She could do nothing but wait for it to be over.

Luella had hoped he would kill her before violating her. But what warmth did a dead body offer?

Just as his hand crested the junction of her thighs, fingers threatening to press where no one had ever touched before, Luella felt a warm splash against her face before a heavy weight fell on top of her.

Her lips pinched at the spray on her skin. She smelled the tang of iron, and the wetness was thick and hot. Her stomach roiled in protest.

Cracking an eye open, she brought a shaking hand up to wipe her face. Her hand came away red with blood. The weight on top of her rolled to the side, groaning in pain.

Through the roaring in her ears, she heard a voice, one now familiar to her and deeply threatening in tone. "Do not *ever* lay a hand on her."

One of the males laughed, a nervous tinge making the edges pitch higher than normal. "Prima," the third male said. He had been quiet to this

point, but the dully excited sound of his voice made her ears tingle with shock and fear.

She wanted it all to be over.

Watching through half-cracked lids as her white-haired captor stalked forward, death was like a promise in his icy, blue eyes. He pointed his sword at Gunnar, where he still lay on the ground. Her vile attacker was rolled to the side where Luella could not see his face clearly, but blood pooled underneath him, adding more red to the once-white marble floors.

"What do you think the King would say if he knew you three tried to take what isn’t yours?" A white braid fell over his shoulder as he reached back to place his free hand on the hilt of his other longsword, brandishing it with a flourish. Her first captor—now turned savior—held one weapon in each hand, the glinting steel tips pointed at the two remaining males. "I wish I could drag this out, but I have places to be, you understand?" He grinned savagely before tacking on a quiet, "I’ll take pleasure in killing you."

And with that strange declaration, he lunged.

In a flurry of metal and the wet thuds of bodies falling, it was over as quickly as it had begun.

A detached finger landed on the ground near Luella’s leg, and she jerked back at the sight of the bloodied appendage, the start of a gasp on her tongue.

She had heard of stories of males coming home from war with vacant eyes and listless expressions, but she had never realized the weight of tragedy and death until it was staring her in the face in all its gory glory.

She stayed lying on the ground, blood from the fallen bodies soaking into her gown, turning the white into a sick red. If she didn’t know any better, she would have assumed the material was made to be such a scarlet shade.

But Luella did know better.

Pressing her body further into the floor as if trying to meld herself into stone and marble, she heard her captor’s footsteps as they pierced the once more silent space. The sounds of her ragged breath filled her ears with buzzing.

He crouched near her head, eyes flitting down to her rucked-up gown and exposed thighs. A purple bruise was already blossoming along the

highest point of her legs in the blurred shape of a hand. His eyes grew even colder, jaw tightening with tension and fury.

The flash of thick tattoos along pale wrists grabbed Luella’s attention as he shifted his hands to right the hem of her nightgown, touch gentle as he smoothed the blood-soaked fabric to cover as much as it could. One of his fingers pressed against a shallow cut on her breastbone. A spark of tingles ignited where his finger trailed against her skin.

The male lifted a hand to reveal smooth, unmarred flesh. Drying blood crusted her fair skin, but no sign of the thin cut that had been etched into it.

He healed her.

A mage then, Luella distantly thought.

If she had any reservations, they were quashed under his healing touches. Combined with his savagery and arched ears, it was clearly evident this male was a mage. And a high-level one at that.

No wonder the males had been so fearful of his arrival.

Through the pounding in her heart that echoed throughout her body, she remembered one of the males calling him *Prima*—a title Luella was unfamiliar with.

"I should have prolonged their suffering," he commented, fingers still brushing patterns over the soft, bloodied skin of her chest. "Depraved creatures taking things that don’t belong to them. They deserved far worse than they got."

He gripped her shoulders, pulling her from the ground. His grasp was surprisingly gentle, and Luella found herself leaning into his touch after the nightmare she had experienced.

He set her on her feet, and before she could react, she was once more taken off guard by her lack of reflexes and training.

Would she ever learn?

A large, uncompromising hand gripped her throat. She choked, trying to inhale, and the male flexed his fingers. Her windpipe threatened to crush under the weight of his strength.

"If you ever think to flee me again, I will not grant you mercy as I am now." The predator leaned down, eyes level with hers as he spoke, his hand squeezing in warning against her neck. "Nod if you understand," he prompted.

Luella nodded quickly. The action was not doing anything at all to dislodge his grip on her.

He must have seemed satisfied with whatever fear he saw on her face, for he rubbed a thumb once down the side of her neck before releasing her.

She staggered back, eyes catching the three mutilated bodies strewn about the foyer, joining the already sordid collection of fallen soldiers and servants.

"Are they… Are they all dead?" Luella whispered, eyes falling to her blood-soaked feet.

She flinched back as his hand fell to her wrist, spinning her around forcibly.

"Yes. Or they'll soon wish they were," the male mumbled the last part under his breath, and the final fragments of her heart that were held together by sheer force of will alone, shattered completely.

Harsh hands squeezed the joints of her wrists together, looping a thick and coarse rope around them. He knotted it tightly, pulling on it to make sure it was secure. He attached the long length of rope that bound her wrists together to his belt loop, giving it a curious look before he nodded once. It must be satisfactory, then.

Luella felt worse than cattle being led to slaughter.

The male turned for the doors, giving a tug on the braided rope. "Come," he ordered.

She stumbled after him, dodging errant limbs and pools of blood as she was led to the doors. They banged open with a crack, letting in the soft, glowing gleam of dawn light.

The grounds were a massacre, just as the inside of the castle had been. Smoke trailed into the sky distantly. Fires lit to burn pyres of bodies or the ruins of houses.

She turned her nose into her shoulder to stop herself from throwing up from the revolting odor of charred flesh.

As she was led forward by her captor, she cast one last glance back to her home of the last nineteen years. Tall, arching spires stood proudly, waving the crest of Solis to the villages below the cliffs.

An arcing trail of fire lit up the early morning dim, a fire-tipped arrow shooting precisely through one of the flags. In one second, it was gone, the material quickly being eaten away by the flames as more arrows followed suit, catching the centers of the Solis crest and burning away any traces of her kingdom.

Where once a proud and pious kingdom stood, now laid to waste. With burning flesh and roaring flames and wicked assailants gobbling up every last bit of their history. Their lands. Their dignity and honor.

And finally, a tear spilled over. One that had been held back with might for the last few tormented hours.

The floodgates opened as another crystalline tear followed.

Another.

And another.

And so, she wept.

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5

PIT OF BEASTS

Luella was thrown roughly to the ground, her shoulders pulling uncomfortably from where her hands were tied behind her.

"Get up," her captor snarled from her back.

She tried to get her feet under her and lift her body, but all the energy had been sapped from her bones. She felt like a useless sack. Unable to do anything but be prey to the will of those around her.

She cried out as her arms were pulled, lifting her to stand with a forcible pull. She lurched to the side as she tried to right herself where her center of gravity warred with the unrelenting grip pulling taut against her bound hands.

The male pulled her closer to his body. "Steel yourself. You've entered the pit of beasts. Any slip-up or slight scent of fear, and they pounce," he whispered gruffly against the top of her frizzed hair. Luella breathed in the scent of ice and snow—something about it soothed an ache in her weary bones, and it took everything in her not to lean into him further. "I saved you from violation once, but if you're caught unaware again, the King will understand if I don't intervene. How else will you learn."

Luella gulped at the threat laced in his words. These males, these hardened, war-torn soldiers, were nothing like the respectable army of the fae.

The shifters and humans were a vile sort, utilizing any means necessary to gain the upper hand. Treachery and war crimes were prevalent. They

treated their females like nothing more than a place to find pleasure and pillaged houses for any spoils to display proudly on their mantels. Some even took locks of hair or butchered appendages to remind themselves of their victory.

It wasn’t a wonder to her that Solis hadn’t even stood a chance against their attackers. The noble integrity of the fae simply was no match for the brute strength and savagery of the shifters.

For fae, it was unheard of to mingle with humans. But the shifters had no such qualms.

Not only did they openly trade and barter with the humans, but they also took them into their beds and trained alongside them in their armies. Luella’s tutors would say it was heinous to rely on such weak creatures; though, she secretly revered their bravery to break bread with whom they wished, as they regarded the humans with such an open heart.

She wished her own people were so accepting.

Luella’s captor led her forward, catcalls and whistling sounded out in tandem with lecherous chants and remarks.

"Look at the little Princess, so far from her castle now."

"You’re with real males now, heirus. We’ll take care of you the way they never knew how in that stuffy palace." Raucous laughter sounded at the words, and through the thick mass of watching males, Luella watched as one soldier shoved another in jest.

Curious, seedy eyes never left her, and she shrank further and further into herself with every taunting remark.

"Never had a fae, but I heard they’re meek fucks."

"I like my females wild. We’ll have to teach her."

The jeers were all around her as she was led deeper into their midst; war horses and soldiers stood around the palace grounds in a haphazard circle. Toward the lower stretches of the trail leading to the front gates of the castle, there was a caravan of wagons and carts attached to the backs of horses.

How long had they laid in wait? Luella thought bitterly.

Her captor stopped short at an imposing beast. A horse that had foam dripping from its maw. Eyes, a dark auburn, and coat an impossible shade of sleek black.

"Gentle, Miria." The male roughly fixed the saddle on his steed, Miria.

Luella’s captor eyed her as she worried her lower lip, shoulders caving inward as the soldiers circled her like birds of prey over carrion.

A sharp whistle cut through the ugly laughs and mocking words. Her captor smiled wildly, running a hand through his braided, white hair as he called out, "Prepare your horses and tend to your spoils. The kingdom of Solis is no more! We ride for Serpentis!"

A rally of cheers let out at his victorious decree, marking themselves as conqueror over Solis. The gathered males quickly departed, preparing their horses and righting their saddles and knapsacks.

One male passed closely by Luella, dragging a rolled-up, white rug behind him. Blood soaked the frayed corners and splattered over the once beautiful design she was sure had been woven into its surface—before the blood caked over it marred the beauty and turned it into something vile.

He grunted as he tried to drag it over a tiny collection of stones, the force causing a limp arm to fall out of the rug. Blood was coated under the fingernails, and one finger was snapped at an odd angle, a white bone sticking out of it.

Luella stumbled back a step, bound hands clenching behind her back as she watched.

The war spoils her captor had been referring to… Lifeless bodies taken to do gods knew what with.

Most of the *spoils* were dead, but a few were alive if the quiet pleas echoing from within the caravans and further into the group of soldiers were anything to go by.

A rattle of chains caused Luella to jerk her head around. The male brandished iron shackles. Faintly glowing runes were carved into the cuffs. An enchantment.

"Good luck escaping with these." The male waved the shackles, a savage grin stretching his lips. "I spelled them with you in mind, but I realize now it was quite a foolish endeavor. The King and Queen kept you under lock and key for a reason." He nosed the air around her as he breathed deeply. "You have no magic."

Luella inched back, as far as she could go with his unrelenting grip on the rope.

"You don’t talk much, Princess. Why is that? Do they keep you dumb and pliant in your castle? After all, what good is a female who can speak."

At the challenge in his voice, she finally spoke, anger welling up in her as she broke her shocked quiet. She never did speak much, though. Whenever she did, it always ended in punishment or reprimand. So Luella realized: why speak at all?

"I d-don’t have anything to say to you…" Her voice cracked at the end, a testament to its disuse and the trauma she had faced.

A curl of her hair was lifted from where it fell against her shoulder. The male rolled the strands of gold between his thumb and first two fingers, a contemplative look on his face. "I think I did like you better silent. Curse me again, and I’ll take your voice, just as I took your freedom."

Luella jerked her head to the side, forcing her hair to fall back against her shoulder. The curl slipped through his hand like silk, and eyes of icy blue never left hers as something dangerous fell over his face.

"You may have taken my freedom, but you’ll never take my soul." Luella stepped closer to the male, her chest brushing his armored stomach. Her voice shook, her body shook, but her soul *burned*. "Or my anger… And if you think for one moment that I will go gently or quietly, you are mistaken. I am not the pliant, meek fae you believe me to be."

He tilted his head back as he barked a laugh. "Oh, I’m under no impression you’re meek. Pliant, perhaps. You *do* come when I urge you." He lifted the rope between them, that savage smile never falling away from his lips. "But not easily. You’re the only female stupid enough to think of running from me, and I’ll collect my dues, Princess. No one escapes me unscathed. Rest assured, what you will face at my hands is nothing compared to what awaits you at Serpentis."

Chills raced down her spine, and she tried to keep up her mask of bravado. "Very well," she said, even though she wanted to curl up into a ball and let the elements take her to her death. "Lead the way." Jerking her head to gesture toward the awaiting steeds, Luella straightened her spine.

A cruel smile played along her captor’s lips, and in the growing daylight, his eyes appeared even more ethereal. A color that rivaled the translucent sheen of ice. He flicked a white braid over his strong shoulders, revealing the thick etching of tattoos she had glimpsed earlier. The ink crawled up the side of his neck and twisted under the line of his armor.

He spun her around, forcing her chest against Miria’s side. The steed’s coarse, black coat scratched Luella’s exposed skin. She felt a tug against her wrists as the male, none too gently, cut through the rope binding her. She

was forced to face him, and her neck ached as she craned her head, peering at him through her lashes.

"Hands," her captor demanded, his palms held out before him.

Luella hesitantly placed her trembling hands in his. Red marks circled the skin of her wrists, angry and pulsing from how the coarse rope had grated against her delicate skin. She winced as he pulled one of her hands to him, lifting the iron cuff to clasp around her wrist before moving to the other.

The two cuffs were attached with a thick metal bar running between them. His fingers tested their inflexible hold, skimming over the already bruised surface of her wrists as he pulled against the chains. With every harsh tug, Luella bit her lip so hard she tasted the iron tang of her blood. She would not let him hear her pain.

He hummed under his breath, lifting the heavy weight of the chains and wrapping the end in his hands. A quick pat against the horse’s rump, and he lifted himself to mount, adeptly swinging a leg over to sit in what was almost a regal fashion atop Miria. The chain grew taut between them, and her shoulders ached.

The male was already tall and imposing but perched upon the beastly steed, he towered over her. Luella felt like an inconsequential speck of dirt compared to the power of this male’s presence.

With a sharp click of his tongue, he urged the horse forward.

"H-hey!" Luela stammered, feet tripping underneath her as she stumbled after the lightly trotting horse. Her hands were pulled in front of her, urging her to follow lest her arms be torn from their sockets.

She had no choice but to stumble after him. It was either that or be dragged against the rough stone and rocks littering the ground, which would very well take off the top layer of her skin.

That might’ve been his goal, flaying her to the bone.

He cast a glance over his shoulder. "Do keep up. Healing a dislocated shoulder would take time that I don’t wish to spare."

Luella bit her tongue to silence a curse. She didn’t want to risk him following through and taking her voice—even though she was not sure how, exactly, he would do such a thing… But Luella wasn’t about to find out.

He was a mage, she was almost certain. She could see it now, in the bright light of early morning. His arched ears were sharper than that of the

fae, like a deadly amalgamation of the lower-level demon beasts and the fae who once bred, creating the mages.

The mages could master the magic of the Spirit and Body, and some could harness one or two elemental powers of their fae lineage. Rocks cut into her soles as her bare feet stumbled over the ground, and Luella wondered what type of elemental magic this mage had and what type of demonic powers ran through his veins.

Her captor was an enigma.

With his thick, black, swirling tattoos and piercing eyes, her first thought was he might have the diluted magic of his demon ancestors, Spirit. The tattoos etched into his skin were most likely imbued with enchantments, working to help make him nearly invincible. His eyes seemed to pierce right through to her soul. Like he knew just a little bit more than he should.

Spirit magic pertained to matters of the inside, and with every curious glance her captor cast over her body, Luella got the sense he was sensing much more than her fear but diving deeper into the depths of her magicless soul.

However, his appearance made her think he had mastery of Body magic. She knew mages that possessed the Body magic of their ancestors were large and deadly, with an unnatural strength brewing under their skin. They were the warriors and could do almost anything pertaining to the body: heal, hurt, increase stamina or endurance, and many other things Luella was not privy to. The mages, like the demons, kept their secrets closely guarded.

As her captor trotted outside the gates to the awaiting collection of soldiers, Luella debated simply giving in. She could fall to the ground and allow him to pull her forward until her arms snapped and her brain finished breaking under the weight of shock and anguish. The thought was so tempting.

I had nothing to live for, her mind traitorously whispered.

But then, she realized.

She had *nothing* to live for.

It was freeing, in a way. To have no one waiting on her with expectations or concerns. She could do whatever she wished. Right now, Luella could grab the sword that dangled from the sheath on her captor’s hip and drive it right into his back. She could stab and stab until *his* eyes grew feared and lifeless, and then turn the blade right on herself.

And no one would care.

She could get her revenge and not worry about repercussions, for everyone she knew was now dead. Or would soon be dead if the cries of pain and torment from the few living prisoners were any indication.

Luella could enact her revenge now and risk being felled before she saw it through, or she could wait, just like earlier when she waited to flee. She did it too soon, then. She had been impatient. Now, she knew better. She would wait longer and bide her time.

Years, if she was permitted to live that long. Luella would wait, just to see the smirk of the male before her turn into a grimace of pain as he realized she had taken everything he loved from him.

And he must have someone he loves, even someone as wretched as he, must find solace somewhere, and Luella vowed to take it from him.

With thoughts of revenge clouding her mind, she steeled herself for the journey ahead. It would not be an easy or short road, but she could do it.

She *would* do it.

One of the soldiers raised a flag attached to a long post. The crest was two elongated points side by side. Fangs.

Another male stood beside him; he had thick, dark hair pulled away from his face in a smattering of tiny, little braids. The male brandished the flag, waving the insignia that was similar to the crest of Serpentis, but where the cold-blooded shifters bore two pointed fangs, the wolven beasts of Nix touted a crest of three pointed hooks, slashing downwards.

"Prima, we’re ready," the one with the Serpentis flag declared. His pupils were little slits, like the snake of his shifted form.

"Very well. Call your men," her captor said.

Again, with the Prima title, she thought.

"Prima," Luella mused under her breath. She had never heard that title before. But from how he led the soldiers and how they answered his call, she wondered what it could possibly mean.

The two males held their flags high in the air before simultaneously driving them into the ground. With a rush of yells and cheers from the soldiers, Luella barely noticed movements from the two that had held the flags.

A loud rip as his leather armor fell away, and the male with the slit-like pupils grew right before her eyes, shifting into a large, green-scaled serpent. He was so big he could open his maw and swallow her with one measly

bite. Two fangs protruded from his mouth, and the large serpent hissed once before quickly slithering away.

A grand beast with fur the shade of melted chocolate howled—fur the same color as the dark hair the male with the crest of Nix had born. The wolf shook his large body. A few braids were still stuck in his fur. He shot Luella a look with eyes that were far too human before taking off, pebbles kicking up under his padded paws.

She shrank back, hands pulling against the iron shackles, but it was no use. Her captor, the so-called Prima, flicked the reins against Miria's hide before taking off in a slow canter. Luella struggled to keep up as the procession moved forward. Her feet tripped and stumbled over jagged rocks and small pebbles, and it was all too much.

Tired and hurt, she wanted to be anywhere but here.

A gasp was torn from her mouth as the horse moved forward with no reprieve.

They made a quick pace from the castle grounds into the awaiting stretch of barren land. Valleys of green grass and flower fields soon cushioned the pads of her feet. She sighed at the softness. Small blessings she never would take for granted again.

Her captor—the Prima, she reminded herself—did not speak again until the sun was high in the sky. Even reaching the beginning of winter, she still felt a small trail of sweat trickle down her back from exertion and the never-ending rays of the sun that beat down overhead.

The sky was cloudless—too perfect of a day for such terror.

They had no shelter in the open like this, and they would not for a while yet if memory served correctly. The valleys would soon turn into a thick forest that bordered Medius.

"We'll stop here for a rest," her captor yelled over the soldiers, stopping Miria with a tug on the reins.

Luella inwardly sighed in relief.

Thank the gods.

Hopping from the steed, he handed off the reins to an awaiting young male, who darted up from behind. He appeared far too young to be in this army. Younger than Luella. Her heart ached for him.

"Thank you, Ori," the Prima said.

"Yes, Tharen—" The young male jolted back, casting an impish glance to where Luella stood, haggard and chained. His stark red hair strangely

offset his tan skin, but it was fitting for his wild appearance. Something in his eyes was still kind, untouched by the horrors of war. He corrected himself. "*Prima*. Don’t tell my father. He’ll get out his leather belt if he catches wind of my negligence."

The Prima… *Tharen*. Names had power, and it seems Luella had finally discovered his.

Tharen passed a hand roughly down his face, shooing Ori off with a wave of a hand and impatience on his face.

"So," Luella started. "The supposed Prima has a name."

Tharen leveled her with a harsh look, finger pointing harshly at her. "You will refer to me as Prima or even Master." His eyes dipped to her lips. "If you dare call me by name in front of these men, I’ll make due on my promise to take your tongue."

The threat held less weight now after seeing his slight kindness to the young Ori.

Luella seemed to never learn her lesson. Evil could wear many faces. Just because it dons a soft smile at one point doesn’t mean it’s gone—just hidden. In an attempt to lure you closer and knock down your walls, it lies in wait, hoping for a slip-up.

And she tended to give it ample opportunity.

"Whatever you say, *Tharen*," Luella emphasized her captor’s name, a small, sly smile on her lips as if daring him to follow through on his threats.

Anger often reared its head at terrible times, clouding all rational thought—this was one such time.

Luella quickly realized she should have kept quiet and obedient as he told her.

She tripped over her feet in her haste to back up as he advanced toward her. He pulled his dagger from his sheath. She yelped as she fell to the ground, hands unable to catch herself from where they bound in front of her.

Tharen knelt over Luella. Such a large figure, he completely blotted out the light of the sun, casting her in shadow. His arm moved, and she flinched. However, the dagger didn’t move closer to her but snaked down to the hemline of her thin, dirty gown. His fingers skirted over her thighs, and the cool point of the dagger dragged across her skin.

"What are you—" Luella’s words were cut off as she watched him roughly rear the bottommost piece of her gown with the jagged edge of the

weapon. Holding up a strip of cloth, he dangled it in front of her face with a triumphant gleam.

"N-no!" she gasped, trying to move her head away.

It was of no use. He firmly gripped her nape, stopping her struggles.

"Defy me again," Tharen dared as he fit his fingers into her jaw, forcing her mouth to open.

The bundle of cloth was shoved between her lips, and she gagged slightly from the harsh treatment. The fabric tasted of iron and dirt, and it pressed against the corners of her lips with harsh force as his fingers worked to deftly tie it off behind her head. Then, he stood, pulling her with him by a hand on her upper arm.

Luella glared at him, even while she was thankful he didn’t cut out her tongue.

Maybe she might die by his hand before the King gets a chance to kill her.

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6

WHISKED AWAY

A heavy, cloth sack plopped against her bare feet.

"Rations. Make it count. It's all you get today."

Luella looked up from where she was sitting against a tree, her bloodied, torn slip barely keeping her covered from the prying eyes of the males around her.

After their earlier break, they had ridden on until dusk, where they were now settling for the night under the thick canopy of the forest. They were almost at the Medius border, and Luella grew filled with dread with every passing hour. One step closer to her death.

Death must feel better than this, though. Her arms ached from being pulled, her feet were a pounding mess of cuts, and her jaw was throbbing from the gag cutting into the skin of her mouth.

Not to mention the mental anguish that cut through her brain like tiny, little knives. Every thought hurt was a stab, and every time she blinked, memories threatened to maul her.

Hands against her thighs. *Stab*.

Warm breath against her neck. *Stab*.

Torn-apart bodies. Bones sticking out from necks. And a pale, lifeless hand on the ground. *Stab, stab, stab—*

Luella flinched away from the thoughts, focusing on her captor with tired eyes.

Tharen stood before her, a hand resting against the dagger sheathed on his thigh. He had removed his leather breastplate and only wore a thin shirt and leather breeches. His weapons remained, though. She would like to think it’s because he found her threatening, but she wouldn’t lie to herself.

It was a harrowing journey from Solis to Serpentis. They had to cross through Medius and hug the coastline before trekking through the outskirts of the villages of Serpentis, full of thieves and outlaws. Only once they were passed did they reach the castle, tucked close to the edges of the water.

Serpentis built their main kingdom close to shore so that they might better trade with other places through their merchant ships. It was a vastly built kingdom, roughly two times the size of Solis, with unique architecture and landscape. Close to the mountains on the northeastern side stood an outcropping of volcanoes and a small serpent-filled village of fire-breathers and cold-blooded shifters.

The northern tip held ruins and temples. For the shifters, it was an outdated practice to worship gods, but the evidence of centuries of past worship was seen in their larger-than-life statues devoted to the snake-like figures—gods and dragons of old.

From the books Luella had studied, she knew the main portion was a rather normal-looking kingdom, with a stone castle lined with guard towers and high walls. The city on the outskirts was a bustling hub for trade and gambling dens.

Serpentis even made a profit off of the blooming buds of the Zarys plant that grew in the valleys of the west. The street name for the hallucinogenic drug that came from the petals dried and made into a paste was Rys. It was sold rampantly in the pleasure halls, and gambling dens of Serpentis, and some even made its way through the strict borders into the fae kingdoms.

Luella had heard a few servants speak of trying Rys before, and the few stories she overheard were enough to make her stay far, far away from any drugs. No matter that her parents would have positively murdered her if they found out she *sullied* herself with something so ghastly and improper.

She was jolted as Tharen firmly pulled the gag from her mouth. The relief of the fabric cutting against her skin made her sigh, and his fingers lingered against her bruised, swollen lips.

"Eat," Tharen commanded. "You’ll need your strength for the journey ahead. Tomorrow, we won’t be making any other stops until dusk. I’ve

received word from the King. He’s anxious to have us at the castle." He regarded me closely before adding, "Anxious to have *you*."

Luella gave a shaky nod, trying not to react to the last part of his words lest she make herself ill from worry. Working her jaw with her bound hands, she quietly unwrapped the twine that held the cloth together. As the coarse material fell apart, a small pile of dried meat and nuts almost tumbled into her lap. With bound hands, she held up a thin strip of brown, leathered meat and dangled it in front of her, dubious.

"You’ll take what I give you or starve," he said.

"I didn’t even say anything," Luella mumbled under her breath, trying not to be disgusted at the feel of the leathery meat in her fingers.

Her attention caught on a raven flitting by, a quick flash of darkness as it swooped low and came to perch upon one of the low-hanging branches near her. The feathers were stark black, and her captor cut his eyes toward it as the bird let out a sharp caw.

Tharen looked back to her, raising a brow as he leaned against the tree. His hand motioned Luella to eat, all thoughts of the raven forgotten with her hunger. She placed the meat back down in the cloth, instead raising a small pine nut to her lips. The taste was rich and savory. She knew she was hungry but didn’t realize how much until the smell made her salivate as the food hit her tongue. She devoured the meager supply of nuts as quickly as she could, ravenous.

Tharen coughed, gesturing to the meat. "That, too."

"I don’t eat meat." Luella stuffed the last of the pine nuts in her mouth, a small satisfied sound escaping her at the intensive flavor.

"Funny," he commented. "Neither do the Terra. They find the whole thing sordid, I’ve heard. With how connected they are to the earth and creatures that roam it, and all that."

Luella chose to ignore his observation, wrapping the cloth around the meat and handing it back to him. He gazed down at her. With how she was sitting against the hard, packed earth and his standing position, her head was level right with his lower thighs. She had to tilt her head far back to catch his gaze.

A glint of something fiery sparked in Tharen’s normally cold eyes. He stepped forward, a hand tangling her hair. She winced as it tugged the already sore skin on her head. The gag had been none too forgiving. It

seemed like he knew, for he reveled in the pain clouding her features, tugging harder.

"I'll be leaving to scout our route ahead into Medius. I'll be back by morning. My soldiers are set to keep watch over you. If they report one bit of trouble or any attempt to flee, I'll leave you to the pack of wolf shifters for the remainder of our journey. They'd find much pleasure in breaking your spirit. I'm sure after a night with them, any fire within you would be snuffed out"

Luella bit her tongue against a retort. Maybe she was the pliant little thing he thought her to be. After not even a full day in captivity, she was already forcing herself silent, making herself smaller out of fear.

Tharen released her, but he surprised her this time by tucking the gag in his pocket. He whistled sharply, beckoning for someone to come over. A male she had never seen before appeared, almost as if he had stepped from the very air where he had been hiding, awaiting Tharen's command.

A cowl was pulled over the lower part of his face, obscuring his features. A dark cloak hid the rest of him, swaths of black tangling up his arms and cascading over his shoulders to fall around his legs. The very tip of a dark leather boot peeked out from under the material of his cloak. Otherwise, he was wholly concealed. He was tall, and his broad shoulders rebelled against the confines of the cloak. He was a bit slighter than Tharen and stood a touch shorter. An enigmatic being that blended with the shadowed corners of the forest.

The hood moved as the male nodded in answer to Tharen's nonverbal demand. The delicate chains woven throughout Tharen's white braids clinked as he bent his head toward the mysterious figure.

Luella watched Tharen's profile as his lips moved, too quiet for her to make out what he was saying. The cloaked figure nodded once more, and Tharen turned back to Luella, placing a firm hand on her head.

"Be good," he muttered before striding off.

She watched his broad back move as he left, gaze flitting down to his legs, watching his powerful strides. He passed a caravan, a wagon covered in a thick, off-white material, with a few soldiers standing around it. They were showcasing jewels, and one even proudly brandished a ruby-encrusted hair comb—their spoils of war. Tharen moved the cover back and disappeared into the wagon, the white fabric falling closed behind him.

She assumed he was redressing in his leather armor to get ready for the scouting exploration.

A shiver wracked through her as the mysterious male sat on the ground, notching a leg up to rest his covered arm over it. Gloved fingers tapped lightly against his knee, and Luella swallowed thickly under his obvious scrutiny.

Even though his features were entirely hidden, she could still feel the heaviness of his eyes as his attention stayed rooted on her. A shine of deep blue pierced through the shadows of his hood as he shifted his head. It was a startling shade, like great pools of deep water in the night, filled with contours of black that perfectly offset the vibrant hues of lapis lazuli.

She pulled her knees up to cover her chest, folding her bound wrists in front of her. She was acutely aware of the thinness of her nightgown, still matted in dried blood and dirt. The tear down the middle was hidden by her folded hands, but with a sharp breeze, the material risked being blown apart, revealing far more than she would ever be comfortable with, especially in this pit of males driven by their basal instincts.

It was a wonder she hadn't already been mauled.

After a few heavy moments of silence, the male's fingers stilled on his knee, and he rested his head back against the tree.

Luella shifted down lower, shimmying her body to get comfortable against the packed earth of the forest floor. Dirt and a few patches of moss occupied the area near the tree she was reclined against. She resigned herself to a sleepless night as she, too, mimicked the male before her and rested her head against the tree. But she knew rest would be fitful. Couldn't imagine being vulnerable in sleep so close to someone who radiated such a quiet sense of danger.

Luella's eyes drifted closed, the day weighing heavily on her even though she didn't want to fall asleep. Not here. Not now.

Flashes of blood and the sound of screams echoed every time she closed her eyes. She tried to tune it out and force her mind to quiet.

And in what seemed like the space between spaces, the matter held between the very air that floated silently all around, she fell asleep.

But her eyes opened…

To the sight of that familiar study that had plagued her the very night prior. The night she had lost everything. This time, the images were slightly more in focus. Luella could even make out the exact shade of maroon paint

on the walls, the gilded borders that crept all around the corners, and the titles of the books that lay closest to her. A particular book shimmered in her periphery, and Luella squinted, trying to make out the words etched on the spine.

Compendium—

Her brows furrowed. She couldn’t see the rest of the words on the worn cover. Like something was keeping her from discovering it.

Luella huffed.

She sat back in the familiar armchair, nestling into its warmth. The fire licked at her bare feet. Blood was crusted along her soles, and a few knicks and scrapes crawled up her legs. Even in a dream, she still had aches and pains, it seemed.

The scent of bergamot wafted to her, and she inhaled deeply, eyes fluttering shut.

A hand caressed her cheek, but she did not open her eyes. She was too afraid that she might scare away the ghostly force that touched her like she was something precious. Something worthy to be held. The palm was warm, and a sigh escaped her parted lips.

"What did they do to you?" The male’s voice floated all around me, soothing and soft.

Luella’s head tilted to rest against the high back of the chair, just as her head had rested uncomfortably on the rough bark of the tree before she fell into this place.

She opened her mouth to speak, but somehow, words escaped her in this dream. She opened her eyes in alarm, a finger drifting to hover over her lips.

The male let out an amused chuckle, and Luella stared at him, arrested by what she saw. Burning, dark, brown eyes, laced with tings of red. Thick perfectly groomed brows that arched over softly sensual features.

Last time, he was a mere impression of a male. Where there might have been a face had only been smudged blurs. This time, everything was in vivid focus—crystal clear and achingly realistic.

Jewels dangled from his ears, and the firelight glinted off of them. His hair was stark black, half pulled up from his nape by a silver chain, while the rest flopped over his eyes. Tattoos swirled up his neck and over the pale skin of his arms, disappearing under the rolled-up cuffs of his black shirt. Where Tharen’s tattoos were blocky and thick, this male had swirls and

delicate lines etched into his skin like lace imprinted onto the surface of the finest of silks.

His appearance was strikingly regal, yet an undertone of lethality simmered. She could see it in the darkness of his eyes. In the red tinge cutting through toward his pupils.

A vampire.

Luella gasped.

She had never seen one before. Most vampires lived in Medius, where they could easily have a supply of blood from the humans. Many of them even struck deals with the humans, blood in exchange for safety. Luella had heard that vampires loved fae blood; it was a delicacy to them. The rarest of liquids that they did almost anything in their power to get their hands—or fangs—on.

"You’re okay, pet," the vampire purred.

She tried to scramble back, but his hand suddenly gripped her face tighter, pulling her closer to him. His eyes flicked down to her lips, then back up to hold her stare. His other hand traced along her collarbone, right where Tharen’s dagger had cut her. The skin was already healed—it hadn’t been more than a nick—but it was almost like he still knew she had been hurt there.

He flaked off a dried bit of blood with his fingernail. "I would never have allowed this to happen." The remark was said low like he had forgotten she was even there.

Luella arched a curious brow, and his eyes tracked the motion. He reached up with his other hand, now cupping her face completely between each of his palms.

"I’ll see you soon enough, pet."

She attempted to shrug off his hold. Her hands came to clasp his wrists, and the feel of his skin was so *real* to her. Ice cold, as though he had been stuck outside for hours in the freezing weather. She shivered.

Desperate to speak, her mouth opened. No sound escaped from her.

In frustration, Luella’s lip curled up in a silent snarl. The vampire chuckled at the sight, carding a cool finger down to her lips, tracing over the edges of them. His skin was so pale that she could see blue veins racing underneath. It gave him an otherwordly beauty, like he was a delicate thing made to be protected and not the creature driven by bloodlust that she knew his kind was.

A sharp stab against her thigh had her jolting away from him. Her hands were torn away from him, and his eyes grew dark with danger, the red sparking and growing deeper. Blood bloomed like a flower on the bare skin of her thigh. Her gown had risen to the junction where her thighs met her hips, and blood slipped over the delicate skin there, pooling against the leather of the chair she was sitting on.

The vampire growled, hands pressing into the wound. Fingers cupped on top of it like he might stop the life force from escaping her—or cup it in his hands to bring to his lips and drink…

He looked as bewildered as she felt. A shallow wound was cut into the skin of her upper thigh, materializing like a burning, phantom touch.

"You must wake up now." The vampire grew rigid and pressed a bloodied thumb onto the skin between her brows, and her body was catapulted backward—

And shoved out of her dreams and back into the real world. It was disconcerting.

Luella could feel her mind tingle from where his thumb pressed into her forehead, a tether pulling her back from the escape of her mind and into the harsh reality of her body.

The feel of the chair underneath her gave way to the hard earth under her. The male before her shimmered like a prism caught in the light. And then, he was gone.

The scene in front of her melted away as she opened her eyes.

Dark green leaves branched out above her, the moon high in the sky still. It was night. Luella hadn’t been asleep for long.

A gasp died in her throat.

It wasn’t the sight of the dark forest around her that caused such fear.

No.

It was the sight of two males standing above her. Soldiers. One had slit pupils and deep, brown hair; the other was twiddling the sharp point of a dagger between his fingers, a long beard shielding his features from view. He grinned at her, lecherous. The tip of his dagger was painted in Luella’s blood.

She felt the sharp throbbing radiating from her thigh, and she winced as she shifted against the ground, dragging her body backward to press even further against the tree. Fear gripped her like a vise. She looked around, many of the soldiers were asleep or too far away from the little alcove of trees and shadows she had tucked herself into, thinking it would keep her safe and protected in the night.

But Luella was alone.

The cloaked figure who had watched her as she fell asleep was gone.

No one would be saving her, and even if the male was around, Luella wondered if he would help her. Or if he would sit back and watch and laugh.

"She’s awake," the one with the dagger uttered. His voice was a sharp whisper as he tried not to wake anyone.

"What d-do you want?" Luella fearfully stuttered. "T-Tharen will be back soon… and he won’t be pleased to see that you’ve hurt his p-prized captive." Though she tried to make her voice strong, it was pathetic and shaky with fear.

The serpent shifter knelt before her, his hand gripping her upper arm. "What the Prima doesn’t know won’t hurt him. After we’re done with you, you won’t be speaking much anyway."

Scream.

Luella scrambled back, the cut on her thigh burning as her mouth popped open to let loose a loud plea for help.

"No, no, no. I don’t think so." A hand was pressed roughly against her lips, and she struggled, desperately trying to free herself from the touch or make enough noise to draw attention.

She couldn’t go through this again. A sob was ripped from her, stifled by the hand pressed against her mouth. She had already been assaulted once, not only a day ago. She didn’t know how much more she could take. And this time, she feared her luck was all gone, and no powerful mage would be coming to rescue her.

She whimpered as the male trailed the dagger up her thigh, her head knocking back against the tree in her struggle.

The serpent shifter was still standing, slit pupils keeping watch around them.

With one final, muffled cry, Luella bit down hard on the skin of his palm, where it was pressed against her lower face. Blood exploded into her

mouth, and he jerked his hand back. Luella spat harshly on the ground. A pleased smile curved her lips at the sight of his blood, but it was short-lived.

A booted foot kicked against her ribs, and Luella curled into herself with the pain, a loud yelp sounding out in the quiet of the night.

And with that sound, like a beckoning call to anyone who might be listening, the hooded figure appeared in a rustle of strange, black feathers.

A feather floated in front of her, landing on top of her blood-soaked gown, and that feather was all Luella could focus on. Even as lives were ended in front of her.

Strangled and guttural yells. So harrowing, it made her feel the urge to throw up. The sharp slap of flesh against flesh. A clatter as the iron blade of the dagger was thrown into the trees. A dull thump of many heavy… pieces…hitting the ground almost simultaneously, and it was done.

In an odd mirror of her earlier assault, she looked away from the sights of violence and didn't move until she felt a gloved hand press against her cheek.

The male was quiet, no words passing from his hidden mouth. He merely coaxed her to sit up. His deep blue eyes tracked the blood on her thigh, and he shifted in front of her in a crouch, covering the two bodies behind him. But she could see a detached hand on the ground, a grisly face, mouth open in shock, and eyes unseeing.

He pressed a hand against his hood, eyes unfocused in thought. He didn't move for a moment, but his strange stillness was broken as his hands came to grasp Luella suddenly, pulling her from the ground.

He led her to a covered wagon on the far reaches of the camp. The same one Tharen had disappeared into earlier.

With a hand still on her arm, he procured a large cloak from within the covers of the wagon. He pulled it tightly around her to cover her thin gown. A small mercy. Not a selfless act of kindness, but one she would feel grateful for, all the same.

Her bare feet stumbled over rocks as he led her to a gallant steed at the far ends of the camp; a thick rope tethered the animal to a tree. This horse was the same size as Miria, but the coat was a shock of white, whereas Miria had sleek black.

Strange, Luella thought. *White-haired Tharen had a black horse, and this shadowed male had a pure white horse.*

She gasped as he lifted her onto the saddle. A bag was already packed and tucked, attached to the side.

Had he been prepared to flee?

Her hands grasped the pommel as the beast shifted under her. She had never been on a horse before, and her thighs clenched in unease, the scratchy coat chaffing against her bare inner thighs.

Fitting a foot onto one of the stirrups, jostling her in the process, the male swiftly pulled himself onto the horse. Sitting right behind her. Her back pressed into his, and she shifted forward to get away from his imposing body, but he wordlessly encased her waist with his hands and pulled her back to nestle into him. The action stole a quiet sound of protest from her lips.

Gloved hands lifted the reins, holding them securely, his arms wrapping around her. She was entirely enveloped. This male pressed into every bit of her; his arms and shoulders hugged her side and front, and she felt his chest against her back, warming her even through the cloaks they both wore. One hand settled low on her stomach, pressing into the folds of her borrowed cloak as he snapped the reins. A sharp and efficient demand for the beast to ride.

In a gallop, they set off into the night. The wind whipped against her hair as it stung her cheeks and made her eyes water.

The pace was unyielding, and Luella had no reprieve from the wind's frigid assault.

She had no idea where they were going, but Tharen put her in this male's care. So she must be kept safe long enough to reach Serpentis, no doubt. After that, she had no hope of keeping her life, but until then, she would wait, praying to the gods that somehow she might find an opportunity. A way to cause an uproar and disrupt the plans of the unbending march of the treacherous and serpentine army.

Luella's life was in their hands.

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7
FROZEN JOURNEY

With aching thighs and a sore backside, Luella clumsily slid from the horse, her feet unsteady as she tried to balance herself.

After riding for what appeared to be hours—for the moon was now falling below the horizon as the sun crested over the tops of the trees—they had stopped. Without a word, her *second* captor had pulled back on the reins, halting the steed from any further movement. A sharp push against her upper back, and he had urged her to dismount before following suit—much more seamlessly than she had.

They were in the middle of nowhere.

Trees stretched in every direction, so tall they almost concealed the dawn light trying to permeate through the fog of early morning. The trunks were large with scraggly roots growing above the ground like twisted variations of arms, reaching out of the earth to grab unsuspecting ankles and pull them to the realm of the Below.

Luella grew cold at the imagery. Perhaps she did read too much. An old cautionary tale; one that her tutors used to tell before bed, trying to stave off her small rebellious phase of disappearing into the forest in search of the will-o'-wisp or chasing butterflies.

Only demons could enter the Below. They freely came into this realm in search of any wandering souls to snack on—or so the exaggerated, cautionary tales proclaimed—before going back to where they belonged.

The scape of fire and brimstone, a realm that stood completely at odds with its *kinder* neighbor, the Above.

Juxtaposed to the beastly, fire-filled region, the Above was home to angelic creatures with white, beautiful wings. From Luella's books, she had seen drawings of floating rocks in the sky above an endless stretch of ocean. She had never seen a demon—higher or lower level—or an angel, but she recalled hiding behind one of the tall pots of the entryway to the castle.

As a young, curious fae, she often found herself getting in trouble for putting her nose where it didn't belong. Leading her to stumble upon meetings and political talks she had no business overhearing.

Once, she had seen a male with stretching, black wings, the tips brushing against the marble floors of the foyer. One of the fallen. Angels who were cast out of the Above to be banished into this realm. They resided on the Fallen Isles, a small collection of islands—nestled between Syreni and the Mortem Sea—where they resided in savage solitude.

Luella gingerly stepped over one of the gnarled roots. It was engrained within her to never step on top of one. She knew it to be an innocent and young act, but how could she go against the tales she knew as well as her soul?

Her captor eyed her, eyes of the darkest blue glinting in what almost appeared to be some form of amusement—if he was even capable of it.

Their stare was broken by a thundering sound underfoot.

She looked around worriedly.

Maybe the tales weren't so false?

As if he could hear her thoughts, the male placed a warm hand on her shoulder, steadying her. Between a far-off copse of trees, she could make out a shape, growing closer and closer.

A steed with a dark as night coat, its rider wearing leather armor, braids of white threaded with chains that caught the light of the rising sun. Sunlight glinted off his golden swords, twin handles of a polished gild crossing over his back.

"Tharen," Luella sighed. The small word made her cloaked captor look at her, and even *she* could not tell if the sound of her voice was feared or relieved.

Tharen pulled to a stop right in front of them, dismounting with ease. His icy eyes shifted between Luella and her involuntary escort.

"Are they dead?" Tharen’s voice cut through the silence.

She expected her newest captor not to give a verbal answer. She had grown used to his ever-present silence.

But he spoke.

His voice was deep and gruff with what she imagined to be disuse, a lilt to the edges that made her eyes want to flutter shut and beg him to never cease. She could fall asleep to the sound.

"Yes," he grumbled. "Both of them. I did as you instructed and left immediately after disposing of them. I’ve heard word from the King. He wants us at Serpentis by tomorrow."

She jolted, realizing they were discussing the two soldiers who had assaulted her. She wasn’t sure how Tharen had gotten word to the male, but it seemed they must have some method of communication.

An enchantment to link their mind, perhaps?

Tharen nodded. "Very well. It will be a long ride, but if we don’t stop, we’ll arrive before sundown."

Tharen lifted her, placing her on top of Miria, before pulling himself up to settle behind her. She was a bit more familiar with riding now and expected it as Miria shifted under her weight. Her thighs clenched in anticipation of the movement, sore muscles screaming in protest.

Tharen’s bare hand settled on the chilled flesh of her upper leg. Her cloak had parted, drifting to fall over her hips and reveal an expanse of her bruised flesh. She shivered as his fingers made indentations into her skin from the force of his grip.

Keen blue eyes chased the hand against her skin, and Luella looked over, watching as the quiet male mounted his steed, the ends of his cloak fluttering from his deft movements. With a sure grip on the reins, he directed the horse to Tharen and Luella, standing right by their side.

The cloaked male was close, and Luella shrank into herself—she had nowhere to go with Tharen behind her, keeping her trapped on the horse. A gloved hand reached out, settling on top of her other bare thigh.

Both of them were touching her.

A sharp inhale was pulled from her lips at their twin touches. She could feel the burn of his added touch against her thigh, even through his gloved hand.

Tharen rumbled a laugh from behind her, and she could feel the vibrations from where he was so closely pressed against her spine.

"Enough, Graves," Tharen ordered, though his tone wasn’t as hardened as Luella had heard it before, rather slightly baiting in nature. They acted like acquaintances or reluctant allies.

She was pleased to learn her second captor’s name so that she might stop calling him *male* in her head.

Graves, Luella mused.

It suited him. A severe and mysterious name for an even more enigmatic and dangerous being.

"You’re just envious," Graves roughly teased. His tone was quiet, and she had to strain to make out the words. He didn’t elaborate on what, exactly, he thought Tharen was envious of.

She felt Tharen shake his head from behind her, and he quickly snapped the reins, starting off in a storm of kicked-up moss on the forest floor under Miria’s hooves.

Graves gave a hushed laugh, the ends of it chasing after Luella and Tharen from where they galloped ahead. Luella heard a loud call as Graves urged his own steed onward before he was riding alongside Miria.

They wove in between trees, and she gasped when Tharen urged Miria to jump over fallen logs, dwindling streams, or bits of cracked earth and stone. Her stomach plummeted from the movement, however small it was, it felt monumental.

Strange, yet freeing—to be airborne, if only for a moment.

She swallowed a giddy laugh that threatened to bubble over, reminding herself that she was heading to her death. This wasn’t some joyous outing of freedom and wind-soaked skies and sun-kissed skin but a leap into a fate she could not escape. Death met everyone. And she will have to resign herself to face it sooner than most. Perhaps she could find comfort in these small moments of joy before the end…

They rode on until the sun was high in the sky.

The air was even cooler here, in Medius, as they started to ascend from the flat earth of valleys and forests into the mountain ranges that would take them even closer to Serepentis. Grassy knolls and endless, packed greenery gave way to stone crags and barren cliffs, dipping sharply toward the tumultuous waters of the coast. The water here was more unforgiving than in the fae kingdoms, like the sirens and water nymphs who lived below spun whirlpools with their hands, breathed storms into the sky with a mere

puff of their lips, and braided threads of lightening into the dark, roiling clouds.

Her hands grew frozen as she numbly pulled the cloak around her frame, shivers wracking throughout her body, growing more and more pressing with every passing moment.

She wasn’t used to such frigid, biting cold, and in the thinness of her tattered gown, she was wholly unprepared to face it.

The wind stung her skin red and froze it into an icy numbness. She burrowed her nose into her shoulder. The action pressed her cheek into Tharen’s chest, and she felt him let out a slight rumble, almost as if in satisfaction. She was too cold to care she was nearly burrowing into him. He whistled a sharp sound that cut through the wind howling.

Graves pulled up beside Miria, tugging back on the leather reins as his white steed stomped upon the ground and let out a whinny in protest from the quick stop.

He lifted a gloved hand to pull the cowl away from his lower mouth, yelling to be heard over the sound of the wind. "What is it?"

Tharen secured an arm around Luella’s waist, and she reveled in the slight warmth radiating from him. He held his other hand out toward Graves, fingers curling as he gestured.

"Give me your cloak. You don’t need it. She does," he gritted out through his teeth like he was angry for having to ask for help. "Her skin is like ice."

"I-I’m okay-" she started, but the words were a broken stammer. Her lips were frozen, and her tongue stumbled over the letters as she tried to speak.

Graves eyed her curiously before conceding.

"I don’t w-want your h-help." Luella recoiled away from Graves, shuddering violently from a harsh gust of wind.

Tharen’s hand firmly slapped against her shoulder, stilling her. "You will take what we give you."

Graves was silent as he lifted a hand to undo the fastening that kept his cloak held tightly over his frame, roughly pushing his hood back as he pulled the cowl away, unraveling it from his neck and baring softly tanned skin and rather lush lips, offset by a strong jaw and straight nose. His hair was a dark brown, nearly black, falling around his ears in shaggy waves,

and those eyes were even more striking when she could take in his features in their entirety.

His appearance was rather regal. Almost too regal to be some shadowed hunter, if not for the jagged edges of a wicked scar cutting into the side of his face.

Luella’s gaze stayed trained on the pale scar that cut through his left eye and curved downward toward his cheek before stopping right by his lip. It was uneven, with jagged edges, but the color was faint like it had been healed for some time. He lifted the scarred side of his mouth in the beginnings of a snarl as if he knew exactly where her eyes had strayed. Like he couldn’t stand the pity that must have been in her features.

But she didn’t pity the male. *Right*?

She couldn’t.

If anything, Luella was curious. How could a creature as deadly as he succumb to the blade of another?

And how might she do the same?

Graves pulled his horse closer, placing a gloved hand on Luella’s shoulder as he tilted her to the side. Her hands floundered as she was shifted off balance in the saddle, but Graves steadied her. He gently wrapped the bottom of the cowl around her face; the fabric was still warm from his breath, and it smelled like cloves and honey. Sharply sweet and addicting.

She breathed in deeply, eyes fluttering shut as Graves wrapped his cloak around her shoulders, reaching around her to pull it tightly to her shaking frame. The fabric of his glove rubbed against her exposed chest as his fingers worked to deftly clasp the hook along the front. His eyes never left hers, gaze piercing, and the deep blue shade was so enticing she wanted to fall into their depths and drown.

Luella never knew blue could be so beautiful yet so lethal.

Graves wore a black, fitted shirt under the cloak. The front was tied with laces, half-done and stopping right at the middle of his chest, exposing tanned skin and hard lines of muscle.

He must be some sort of powerful creature to be able to withstand such frigid chill. The fae were more fragile in that sense—less durable. Healed slower than the other creatures, yet quicker than the humans.

He placed a hand under her chin, forcing her gaze up. "Curious," he remarked. A smirk painted his features, scarred lip tugging up wickedly.

She shook her head vehemently but didn’t try to speak. Her mouth was still far too frozen to accurately string together coherent sentences.

Tharen settled a rough palm against her now-covered shoulder, flicking Grave’s hand away. "Alright, enough of that. We need to make haste. The King and his"—Tharen stumbled over his words for a moment before adding—"*Advisor* would like us there before nightfall. And I’d rather not risk sparking his ire. You know how furious the King can get during one of his tantrums."

"Don’t I know. Fire-breathing bastard," Graves mumbled the last part under his breath as if in afterthought.

Everyone knew how temperamental serpent shifters could be. As a rare dragon shifter, the King of Serpentis was not known for his patience or long-suffering.

And Luella would soon be at his mercy.

She shuddered, but this time not from the harsh wind.

Tharen’s hand came to rest at the base of her throat, cupping her, before he slipped his fingers under her cloak, resting against her breastbone. His palm radiated a pleasant sort of heat. Her head tipped back, and she swallowed down a sound of satisfaction from the pleasant warmth.

"How are you doing that?" she forced out, teeth still chattering.

Tharen’s head dipped, mouth pressing against her ear as he blew hot air against it. "Prima mage. Don’t you remember, *Princess*?" He nipped the skin under her ear harshly as if in reprimand. "I am the prime of all mages. Master of both Spirit and Body and wielder of all four elements".

A sudden rush of heat burned her skin, and she yelped.

"Ignis…?" Luella breathed. The magic of Ignis—fire—burned her bare flesh.

How? she thought.

Most mages, from her understanding, only had a watered-down ability to wield one—or two at best—of the four elemental magics of the fae, and none had ever been documented to have both of the demon magics of Spirit and Body.

Tharen hummed. "I have mastery of everything in the body. Sense your heartbeat, control your temperature, and settle your nerves… But *this*," he emphasized the hot flash against her chest. She knew a reddened handprint would be left against her skin. "This is all Ignis. I can wield all four of the elements." The mage demonstrated his self-proclaimed prowess with a

sudden flutter of the fingertips of his free hand, little whirls of air swirling at the behest of his movements.

Aer magic.

She had never seen it before.

"You’re powerful." The words slipped out unbidden, and male satisfaction glinted on Tharen’s features, smug and assured from her compliment.

If not for the frigid chill freezing her skin and making it blue, a blush would have given her embarrassment away.

The heat of the palm against her chest calmed to a pleasant warmth once more, radiating a source of reprieve against the chill and her frozen skin. She settled back into Tharen, hands tucking into the folds of her borrowed cloak.

Graves looked over at her, gloved hands flexing against the reins as though he were itching to reach out and touch her but having to physically force himself to hold back. She traced the line of his scar with her eyes, throat bobbing as her attention dipped to veins along his neck; scars littered his skin. He was covered in a history of violence.

Clearing his throat, Graves whipped the reins, his steed spurred into action and starting ahead, forcing the wind to blow a harsh breeze back on Luella and Tharen.

Behind her, Tharen kept his hand against her chest and pulled her even closer into the shield of his body, wide shoulders curving around her like he was trying to block the harsh winds as best as he could.

Tharen snapped the reins with one hand, his other still resting on the skin of her chest. Miria gave a low whinny, hooves kicking up pebbles, and they were off into the windy peaks of the coast, following after the relentless gallop of Graves atop his pure, white steed.

Luella allowed her mind to wander in these last few precious moments she had of freedom.

She savored it.

Relishing in the brisk wind cutting through her, the sight of glorious cliffs and crashing waves against ocean rocks, and even the steady thrum of heat that radiated from her captor’s palm against her flesh. She wished to keep everything frozen in time—in memory, so that she may fall into its embrace like the pages of a book, to steal away from the hardships and trials she would soon be forced to endure.

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8

THE DRAGON KING

Miria's hooves clopped against the cobblestone pathway, companion sounds of marching to Graves's snow-white steed, from where he walked alongside them.

Luella's spine stiffened at the sight of the spires ahead, stretching up above a collection of shops as the winding pathway led languorously up toward the softly slopping hill on which the castle of Serpentis was perched.

Stone walls enclosed the main part of the city, tall archways etched in old markings of flame-spewing beasts and slithering serpents. The calling of merchants filled the city, along with the cajoling taunts of nearby Rys dealers—beckoning passersby down into the belly of the city, smoke drifting from the entrances of the stone stairways that led somewhere deep out of sight, joining with echos of laughter and bawdy tunes.

The whole kingdom was sinful. Lecherously free with displays of wanton desires. Scantily clad females stood in plain view, hands beckoning any passing villagers to come closer and have a taste, fingers teasingly skimming over their exposed stomachs and eyes half-lidded as pipes puffed purple smoke, flowing over their red-painted lips.

Luella pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders, chin held downward to hide herself as best as she was able. She felt too exposed. It was too open here.

Graves had taken the cowl away from her before they had entered the city, and his lower face was once more covered. He also had detached the

hood from her borrowed cloak, leaving her features completely exposed, while he was, once more, shrouded in mystery.

At least he didn't take the covering of the cloak away from her. The way eyes tracked her movements made her feel slimy and dirty; Luella could only figure it would be far, far worse if she was covered in the mere thinness of her gown.

This kingdom.

She had never seen something so wicked before. Even for all the books she had read in her short life, nothing could have prepared her for *this*. The tales from the cackling servants in the kitchens as she used to hide inside the pantry to escape… and the lady's maids that used to bathe her that would often speak over her like she wasn't even there, talking of their latest conquests and various *bedroom* activities they got up to in the middle of the night, stolen moments in between shadowed hallways or empty closets. Even with all of the words that had whispered secret things—stories she had taken and tucked far in her curious mind—still, she had never been privy to something so vile and open in sensuality.

The fae were quiet. Pious to the gods who were otherwise lost to the rest of the kingdoms. Gods so old that their names had been forgotten. And in that piousness, Luella had been raised under a shroud of demure secrecy, led to not ask questions. To not be curious.

Curiosity was as much of a part of her as her wish for freedom, and even as Luella hid her face in her shoulder, shrinking into Tharen where he was pressed flush to her back, her curious eyes never ceased taking in the sights all around, gobbling them up like something starved.

Dark blue eyes cut toward her, narrowing slightly like Graves heard the turmoil brewing within her mind and wished he could extract and dissect it.

Miria clopped along, Luella's hips shifting with every uneven step.

At first, they drew no attention, for the inhabitants of this kingdom were far too caught up in themselves and their desires to pay heed to anything of curious or novel intent. Not until a passing merchant caught sight of their onward procession—a young female pushing a cart full of red-skinned apples, her deep, green eyes widening in recognition as she lifted one of her wares, weighing it in her hands, before quickly lifting it and hurtling it right at Luella's face.

The apple hit dead on, smacking into Luella's cheek and making her body jolt back into Tharen. She yelped, cowering back into the mage behind

her, shaky hands coming up to protect her face from any more attacks. Her cheek throbbed from the impact, and she could feel blood welling up on her pulsing lip from the force of the fruit as it had busted the delicate skin open. Iron filled her mouth, and she let out a low whine from the pained throbbing.

"Hey!" Tharen boomed. His hand came to delicately cup Luella's cheek, and she turned her head, watching through half-lidded eyes as he lifted his other hand, urging Graves into action with a swift gesture of his hand.

The cloaked male answered in equal quickness, lifting a dagger from his belt as he flipped it once, catching it with expertise. And then flung it right toward the female.

"No!" The plea was torn from Luella's bruised and throbbing lips.

No, she wouldn't allow this female to be killed on her behalf! Not another innocent caught in the crosshairs… Maybe the female wasn't quite so innocent, but the rage in her eyes was a protective sort. Luella could not fault her for taking care of her own, for being so consumed by rage that she acted before she could think through the consequences.

And the weapon of choice had been an apple. Not a sword.

Her lip was smarting, but she would live.

Graves cut his eyes toward Luella at her noise of protest. His dagger arced precisely as it flew through the air, right before pinning the second apple the female was weighing experimentally in her hands.

With a quick *thunk*, the sharp tip of Graves's dagger dug into the succulent flesh, rending it from the female's hands as the apple was thrown back against the wooden post behind her. The hilt of the dagger jutted out, the blade perfectly embedded clean through the apple and into the post, securing it there in a mocking warning.

"It is the Knight."

Echos of *the Knight* whispered throughout the square, hackles raising as the villagers caught sight of who, exactly, was in their midst.

The female backed away. It had all happened so quickly that it took a moment for everyone to catch up.

The calling cries of the merchants and the jovial talks of villagers were snuffed out, everyone in the square slowly backing away from where Graves and Tharen were perched high upon their steeds. The female's eyes shifted from Graves to Luella. Tharen snarled behind her, and the female

jerked her head away, not willing to risk staring at Luella, where she was tucked into the mage’s body.

"Prima," the female whispered, fear painting her voice. She did not look at Tharen and did not acknowledge the male who had thrown the dagger. Like she was too scared to even look at him—at either of them.

A cacophony of whispers slowly filled the silent spaces of the square. Curious, feared eyes were on them, and Luella shrank back under their cold weight.

Even with the anger she felt radiating off of the villagers like sharp steel caressing her skin, no one was brave enough to attempt a second attack, instead settling on curses and cries and pleas for death and all sorts of violent measures.

"Kill her!"

"Take her head."

"No! Throw her in the fighting dens."

"Tear her to shreds."

"Let our males have a taste before her death." Laughter rang out.

They cried and cried out, and her ears rang with the yells of violence. They spoke of doing unimaginable things to her. *With* her. Graves shot her a look, a gloved hand flexing on the reins of his steed, while the other reached for the second dagger Luella could see peeking out from underneath his cloak.

One male with slitted eyes ventured closer, fists clenching as smoke wafted from his flaring nostrils. "Let’s see how an *heirus fae*," he sneered the words, "would last in our pits. We’d maul her."

Another deadly growl emitted from behind Luella, she felt it seep into her bones—why was it so comforting? Tharen tucked her further into him, a strong, thick arm wrapping around her torso. His palm rested on her stomach, and she hesitantly placed her own on top of it, holding him to her, seeking safety from the strangest of places.

She would take her chances with her two captors over this crowd. At least they had to bring her to the King alive. She would be torn apart if these villagers got their hands on her—but not before she was violated.

"Let’s go," Graves sharply commanded from their side. His words were slightly muffled by his cowl. "We should never have come this way, and *you* know it."

Tharen didn’t cower back from the lethality in Graves’s tone. "She needed to see." His fingers dug into her stomach, and the thick thighs that bracketed hers moved closer.

She was trapped by him, and right now, Luella could only feel relief. If not for these two males, she would be at the mercy of this crowd.

See *what* Luella didn’t know. Perhaps he meant the cruelty of his people. But she was already incensed against the shifters and Serpentis; she didn’t need any more fuel for the vengeance-filled fire that brewed within her.

The mage called Miria to continue, Graves clicking his tongue and urging his own horse forward. The throng of villagers receded as Graves led the way, flipping a dagger in his hands as they trotted on, head swiveling as he looked for threats, shooting anyone who dared to come close with what she knew would be a vengeful stare.

Their pace wasn’t quick enough, even for Graves’s silent warning. They couldn’t hurry through the square and villages at any faster pace than they now walked. The streets were packed too tightly, growing more and more crowded with every passing moment as word spread of their arrival in an angry hush of whispers throughout the kingdom.

"A captive." The words echoed all around. "The Princess of Solis."

They finally stopped at the crest of a slow-rising peak that reached a crescendo at a towering stone wall that curved around the castle that lay within its midst. A fortress.

Luella felt a strange wave of surrealness settle over her.

This was it. This was where she would die.

Tharen said something. His words were drowned out by the roaring in her ears. It was like she was standing underwater and listening through the crashing waves as he, no doubt, called for the sentinel standing by to let them in through the gates.

A loud groan pierced through the haze of roaring shock that clouded her senses. Two arched doors of the gate slowly opened, revealing the courtyard and castle of Serpentis.

Green grass grew in a carpet of lush scenery, trees sprouted from a nearby garden, and red succulent apples dangled from their limbs. The castle was light grey stone, built to weather the elements where it was perched right on the edge of the cliff, privy to all sorts of storms and gusts of wind. It was a large and imposing palace, much more grand than the

castle in Solis. Towers lined the wall, keeping it safe, soldiers positioned at every guard tower, their bows at the ready, as they trained right on her heart.

She distantly wished one arrow would fly loose and take her out now before she met an even more violent end. She thought of the fighting dens the villagers had spoken of, the chopping block where heads rolled, the dungeons full of rusted knives and torturous instruments she knew would be lurking below…

Luella's palms grew clammy with fear.

The double doors of the castle banged open, and she looked up.

Her gaze instantly locked on *his*… and it was like everything stopped. Drawn toward piercing and snakelike green eyes, like a moth drawn toward a burning flame. She was a mere insect, caught in the sticky web of a spider's trap. He tracked her, never breaking away from her golden eyes, startled wide, all while Tharen and Graves led their horses closer to the grand, curved stone steps that led right to him.

The King of Serpentis. The Cruel Dragon King.

She gulped, growing dizzy.

He wore a striking red cape, the ends sweeping off his shoulders and billowing out behind him as he spread his arms wide in some sort of twisted welcome. Golden hair shone under the dimming light of the eve. His cape was clasped at his neck with a gleaming, green jewel-encrusted in gold twine. The same sort of green that emanated from his eyes. The green of the serpentine shifters. Ruthless and cunning and wicked.

She truly had no chance.

"There you are," the King proclaimed. His voice boomed over the courtyard, and even Miria grew nervous under her, feet kicking up in her fear. This male beckoned fear from all around, radiating cunning dominance like the startling shockwaves of an earthquake. Undeniable and lingering.

Tharen dismounted, and she felt empty without his presence. He immediately reached out to help her down. She did so unsteadily, placing a shaking hand in his firm grip as she clumsily got off the horse. Graves came to stand beside her, and she was so wrapped up in the imposing force of regality in front of her she had missed the shadowed male dismounting as well; his snow-white steed kept tethered to him by the reins he held, his hood was pulled back, and his cowl rested under his neck like a scarf.

He felt free enough to reveal his face here… She wondered what made him cover up outside the confines of the palace gates.

Graves took to his knee, a closed fist pressed right over his heart. "My King. We have delivered her to you safely, as requested."

"Kneel," Tharen whispered harshly in Luella’s ear, before pressing her down with a firm palm against her shoulder.

She had no choice but to relent under the weight forcing her to both knees. The mage followed suit, but only on one knee, the other crooked in front of him. She assumed her position as a prisoner did not allow her the decency of such a pose. She was forced to both knees like some common traitor or the worst of criminals, wholly at the King’s mercy.

"Princess Luella Ilis Eritrais of the now conquered Kingdom of Solis," Tharen declared, shoving a hand against the small of her back to force her face to the ground.

She was forced to fully prostrate herself. Vulnerable. Luella could do nothing but allow her already bruised cheek to be pressed firmly to the stone path. It grated against her skin and the cut on her lip from the thrown apple. Her hands came to rest beside her head as if attempting to protect herself as much as she could.

Footsteps sounded, growing closer and closer as the King descended the steps to come to rest right before her splayed form. She could see his shoes, polished to a shine, stopping right near her head.

There were shuffling noises as Tharen and Graves stood, now anchoring either side of her.

"She’s not much," the King remarked. This close, she could make out the rumbling lilt of his voice, deep and throaty, brimming with power. This was the voice of a male who could command armies and lay siege to kingdoms with a mere word. This was the voice of a male who so easily upended her entire life and slaughtered innocents.

Her chest heaved in anger. Fury pounded a staccato of war drums behind her ribcage. No hands were keeping her forced to the ground any longer.

And so Luella rose.

Palms pressed to the rough stone, she supported her weight on slightly shaking arms, coming to rest on her heels. She refused to be in this cruel male’s presence without staring him down—or *up*, as it were. A softly uttered challenge shined in her wide, golden eyes. Or maybe that was the shine of tears.

Because those in Solis did not get the privilege of meeting their deaths head-on, she would bear it for them.

Slowly, Luella raised her eyes to his, going from thick thighs up to a silk-swathed chest, tracking over the pulsing vein in his neck as golden eyes met deep, green pits of unfaltering and cruel intent. His face was chiseled. Hard features that wore an even more severe expression. He had a regalness about him. Yet, he did not truly look like the King he was. More like a rugged and ruthless soldier masquerading as commander. His light, golden hair was the only soft part of him. Her head barely brushed his thighs from her seated position. With Graves and Tharen on either side of her, she felt closed in. Trapped. Unable to escape.

She attempted to settle herself with a breath, feeling sticking in her lungs.

The King’s eyes tracked over every little part of her being. Categorizing the stolen cloak she wore; her frizzy, pale blonde hair, the ends matted in red blood; her golden eyes; and soft cheekbones that spoke of innocence and her status as an heirus. His gaze landed heavily on her lips, bruised and swollen, with a split right in the center from the apple.

She raised her chin defiantly, refusing to cower even when she wanted to return to her prostrate position and bury her head under the stone of the pathway and pretend it was all a nightmare.

The side of his plush lips tilted up in amusement like she was some game or prize and not a living creature.

"She has a fire brewing within her." The King turned his attention to Graves and Tharen. "I thought the soldiers would have snuffed it out by now. If not by the depraved wolf shifters, then by your hands," he commented.

They did not respond to him, both remaining completely silent.

"No matter," the King continued. "Small blessings. I will relish being the one to break her and take away any traces of that fire and rebellion. This sheltered little Princess of Solis won’t last a day in our kingdom. We’re far too twisted for the likes of such delicate fae." A hand adorned in glittering, golden rings came to rest against her cheek. His bare palm flattened to cover the whole side of her face.

He could crush her. A mere twist of his wrist could turn the bones of her jaw to dust.

Fingers moved to dance across her cheeks and lightly traced her lips before brushing against the split, delicate skin. Skirting over the corners of her mouth, moving to settle right under her chin. He gripped her face firmly, the pads of his fingers a rough force, unbending as they moved her head to the right—toward the outside of the gates, which were closed, trapping her. She hadn't even heard the thundering boom as they slammed shut, wholly entrapped by the King. Though the gates were closed, sealing them off from the prying eyes outside, she knew what lay behind the towering walls: the wicked depravity that was the heart of the Kingdom of Serpentis.

The King forced Luella's head back to meet his gaze, looming over her in supremacy. His other hand flicked up, fingers snapping as green eyes never left hers.

Who would bend first?

Who would look away?

She had read once that the wolf shifters asserted dominance by a game of wills. Holding eye contact until one broke away first—the one who never strayed was proclaimed as the alpha. It felt exactly like what the King was doing to her now, asserting his dominance over her like they were both no more than the feral beasts that ran amuck in the woods.

But Luella refused to bend. Even when her shoulders shook, and her lower lip trembled under the weight of his predatory stare…

From the beckoning wave of his hand, more footsteps sounded out, stopping further away. She refused to look and lose this game she had found herself trapped in.

"Take her to a holding cell for the night. Perhaps the sight of the executions will chip away some of that strength," the King commanded of the male who arrived.

She tried not to focus on what his words meant.

"Yes, my King," the newcomer spoke. His voice was so familiar to her. Warm and lush, like amber-tinted liquor spilling into the finest of glasses. She smelled bergamot, and the scent unlocked memories of the dream she had tucked away.

Warmth from a crackling fire; the plushness of a chair under her bare thighs, the leather sticking to her skin as she shifted; cool fingertips pressed against her face; whispered words of *I'm sorry*.

The vampire in the study.

Luella gasped, her eyes tearing away from the King as she looked toward the steps leading to the castle.

And there stood the male—the *vampire*. Familiar, red-tinged eyes with glittering points of silver dangling from his lobes. A high collar of deep, black silk, enterlaced with red, cracked embroidery that gave way to a fine suit, embellished with more blood-red accents and peculiar lapels of silver.

She was glad she was already kneeling; otherwise, she would've fallen to her knees at the sight of the vampire in front of her.

Vampires had magic of the Mind. And in the aftermath of her second assault, she had tucked away that particular tidbit back into the recesses of her memory—too wrapped up in unwanted touches that she had forgotten the dreamy memory of *his* fingers against her skin, his reddened eyes, the sound of his voice as he whispered that demeaning endearment, *pet*.

That was all fae and other creatures were to the vampires: pets and blood bags. Food.

They used their magic to prey on minds, chipping away at blocks and breaking into the quiet spaces and safety of innermost thoughts, walking along shelves of memories and planting a fervent desire to give in, tearing away free will and compelling victims.

Had he… Had he done that to her? Compelled her to be drawn to him, making her the perfect, willing food source.

She shuddered as the vampire drew closer.

Surely she would know?

Right?

The vampire was impeccable in appearance. More regal than the King in front of her. Like seduction and sin and …

No.

She stopped her thoughts from going any further. She didn't find him attractive. She couldn't. He was deplorable. A vile, twisted creature who would drain her dry in a mere instance if he so wished.

The King stepped back, making way for the vampire with a flourish of his rugged hands. An adornment of a red sash was tied around the vampire's waist, and he unlooped the stylish knot that kept it tied, stepping closer as he unfurled the ribbon-like material, waving it before him with a sensual smirk.

"You smell divine, pet. Fear makes for a wonderful aphrodisiac." The vampire inhaled deeply. "It will be even more potent when I rob you of

sight," he murmured, large and imposing body right before her as his hands elegantly wrapped around her head, placing the sash over her eyes.

She lifted her hands in an attempt to stop him. "Please," she whimpered as the darkness clouded her vision.

Luella could no longer see, hands fluttering in front of her as she felt whispers of cold against her cheeks and the back of her head—the vampire tied the blindfold off in a knot behind her head, giving it a light tug to make sure it was secure.

"Stand," the King commanded.

She experienced everything in far more detail, with her sight robbed of her. As though all her other senses were heightened in the grip of the darkness. And her fear, too.

From her left side, a gloved hand settled on her shoulder. Graves. He urgently called her to rise to her feet, and another hand, this one bare, settled on her right shoulder, so large a thumb pressed into her collarbone as the male's palm spanned her skin—Tharen.

Luella suddenly wished she was back on the horse, tucked safely into the cocoon of the mage's body. At least they were the evil she knew. Compared to the two males standing before her: one with a reputation of violence and bloodshed, the other with the power to cripple her from the inside out—wholly unknown. And sometimes, the unknown is worse than the known.

The vampire could be an even worse creature than the Cruel Dragon King—even for all of the King's might and the horror stories that trailed after him like phantoms, uttered in the quietest parts of the night and regaled around firepits. The heirus told tales of treachery and gore passed down from the dominium. Mere folklore to them, some distant, far-off notion of horror, now brought to their very doorstep and weeding into their homes like a thief in the night, stealing the heirus from their beds and tearing them away from their parents. Pillaged villages and heads on spikes that lined the roads into towns, all so the King might scare away anyone who tried to defy or overpower him.

This vampiric creature was a total mystery to Luella. With his Mind magic and forcible entry into her dreams, she could only shudder at the prospect of what he may have planted in her head. What he may have *found* there. She felt cracked open and defiled. All her thoughts, all her wishes… *Stolen* by this male.

The hands that were on her shoulders fell away, but not before she felt the gloved hands of Graves work to unclasp the cloak. He slipped it from her shoulders, leaving her in nothing but her ruined nearly see-through gown. More than just her shivering, hurt body was exposed. She felt like some object, paraded about, her skin flayed and bones pried back so that all could see the bleeding heart encased by the cage of her ribs. She was at their mercy.

Luella couldn’t hide herself away from the eyes she could almost feel burning a path into her skin as they tracked over every bit of her. Two pairs of eyes, like flickering flames, left a scorching trail of fire on her. Graves and Tharen had already had their fill. Now, it was time for the King and the vampire to scrutinize her as if she was mere breeding stock or some prized cattle up for auction.

She inwardly seethed, but outwardly, she was a mess—and she knew it, too. Everyone did.

"Take her," the King commanded. His tone was clouded with dismissal. He was done with her, then. At least for this eve.

The future dangled over her with foreboding, even more prominent, as she was robbed of sight. An unstoppable force, just as the King was an unstoppable ruler.

She felt ice-cold hands on her bare arms, fingers *tap tap tapping* along her skin like the vampire was pressing on her veins and nerves like the keys of a piano. Playing her, discovering the right tune and notes to hit—all to find the sweetest and most satisfactory symphony of sounds.

The vampire was gentle. Much more so than Graves and Tharen had been with her. His hands lightly skimmed along her flesh, leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake from the unnatural coldness of his skin. He urged her forward but in a softly guiding motion—not at all like her two previous handlers.

She didn’t let her guard down. Not for a moment would she become complacent in the face of this strange display of innocence and… kindness. And almost what could be described as reverence and awe, the way this vampire touched her. Each brush against her skin was more pronounced without her sight, every nerve ending standing to attention.

She felt everything in startling detail. Even down to the whisper of air against her bruised skin.

Her bare feet brushed over the stone of the path, giving way to lush grass under her feet as they entered what must have been the garden and orchard within the palace grounds. Low-hanging limbs tickled her shoulders and the top of her head as they passed, and she felt trepidation, afraid she might run face-first into some tree or statue. But she never did. The quiet vampire led her onward, never faltering or misguiding her.

How peculiar.

They came to a stop. Once again, stone under her feet. It felt like they had walked through a short maze full of twists and turns, going from rough stone to grass and back again. She heard the faint tinkling of chains as though the frigid mountain air was blowing them and causing the sound. He guided her a step further, and her foot landed in something wet and sticky. It was cold and thick, whatever it was. Like something that had congealed or been left to dry under the sun. Her mind immediately conjured images of coagulated blood, and she felt churning in the pits of her stomach.

Luella knew where the vampire had taken her.

The cornucopia of the palace.

She could see it now. The image was so clear in her head, as though the blindfold wasn’t even there. From the path her feet had tracked, her mind conjured up a shining light focused on deadly horrors, surrounded by a short maze of trees and stone pathways interlaced with green grass carving symbols into the ground. All leading right toward the centerpiece of a grotesque place of sick performance. She imagined it to be a well-crafted stage, lined with various tools for execution. Blood-rusted knives; thick, knotted rope; whips and chains; or even wickedly curved blades to cut out the innards of treasonous villagers and draw out their deaths.

A cold breath whispered over her ear. "This is your future."

"Why don’t you just kill me now?" Luella trembled as she spoke.

"Where would be the fun in that?" The vampire huffed a quiet laugh.

She felt something sharp poke her neck, not piercing the skin but merely flirting with the idea of it. The temptation. His fangs traced up her neck and ghosted along her pulse point, where she knew he could feel her little heart hammering in a thunder-like rhythm. "If you breathe a word of our dream trysts to anyone, I will drain you dry until you’re nothing but a shell of the little, fae heirus you once were."

"We had no trysts," she countered. Her tone grew emphatic in her plight to defend her purity.

"As far as I’m concerned, we did. I smelled you." His tongue flicked out to trace over her neck. "I felt your dried blood on my fingers. I tasted you. You may not know this, pet, but once I set my sights on something, I will not rest until I have it. You will be mine. It’s just a matter of time, and I will go against the King himself if I have to stop your death. So don’t fret. You will live." He nudged her head with his nose in a mockery of a comforting action. "I will make sure of it. Just as I will make sure that I have you."

Her mouth parted as she drew in a breath. She felt a strange thrumming in her lower belly, right below her navel. A place where she had never felt such a pulsating, incessant heat before. She tried to ignore it.

"No one has ever had me, and you certainly will not be the first," she vowed.

"But the second, then?" The vampire laughed against her skin. "I can make peace with that; just know that I’ll be the one to have you unlike any other. Your very lifeforce is mine." His thumb came to rest upon her split lip. She had forgotten about it, but now, with his forceful touch, it started to throb anew. His fingers flaked off some of the blood against her chin, where it had dribbled from the cut on her lip. The faded scent of iron drifted to her, and she felt him groan loudly. "The purest of nectar."

In a quick flurry, he untied the blindfold from Luella’s eyes. She squinted at the change, even in this dim of the evening.

And with that strange promise echoing between them, his hands left her body as she looked around.

She heard a wailing groan as the iron bars of the small holding cell before her were opened. The vampire shoved her forward onto the blood-stained ground, and she let out a startled noise. He wasn’t gentle this time.

She landed on her hands and knees, and the doors clanged shut. There was a click behind her, and she turned, head whipping.

He pulled a key back, and she realized. He had locked her in!

"No," she pleaded, still on her hands and knees. Her matted hair hung around her shaking shoulders, and she knew her golden eyes were wide with terror.

Luella stood quickly, her features quickly turning to righteous fury. This was the first of many horrors she would be forced to face. But he had been so *gentle* with her. If he had visited her dreams, surely there was some part of this vampire that was… curious about her? And his promise, still hanging heavily in the air between them—he swore she would not die.

That promise was the only thing keeping her sane.

He stood right outside the bars of the small cage. Luella could barely stand and had only enough room to hold her arms out straight on either side of her.

The cage faced the execution grounds. Built like a small arena, it was surrounded by pathways of stone and enclosed in walls of apple trees, their red skin gleaming in temptation.

The iron bars separated them, and she knew she shouldn’t get so close—he could easily reach a slender hand between the bars and crush her throat, pull her wrist to him, sink those gleaming fangs right into her pounding pulse point, drain her dry…

She knew all of this, and yet, something was drawing her closer. His rich scent soaked her skin, and she wanted to drown in it.

The vampire was even more frightening up close. Luella felt his breath stir her hair from his proximity, and his hands gripped the bars between them. She refused to let herself cower back from his presence. Feet firmly planted on the chilled ground below her, she watched him with a glint in her eye, jaw grinding in anger and loud resentment. All while a soft tremble gave away her true feelings.

Pale fingers tapped on the bars. The vampire bid her farewell with one last word. "Tomorrow."

A warning, a threat, or a promise… Luella was unsure of which. But what she did know… She was doomed.

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9

AWAITING FATE

In the aftermath of the vampire's presence, Luella wilted.

Alone.

For the first time since her life had ended and her freedom had been stolen…

She was alone.

Her legs gave out from under her, and she crumpled to the ground.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream, but she refused to be loud and let her anger out. For too long, she had been used to stifling her cries. It came easy to her. Even easier in this pit of despair that she had found herself trapped in.

The iron bars of her cage enclosed her, growing tighter and tighter, squeezing her. She couldn't breathe. The congealed blood shone under pale moonlight that filtered in through the thick canopy of apple trees, and her chest rose and fell heavily. She swore it was like she could feel the bars of the cage grow even closer around her, constricting. The tree limbs seemed to grow thicker, gusts of air making the leaves flutter dangerously, thick arm-like branches holding back the sky, dipping lower… Like they might wish to reach into the cage and devour her whole, squeeze her until she was nothing but an unrecognizable, lifeless mass discarded on the gore-soaked ground.

Luella wailed, a mournful and silent death cry as she lamented all the innocent lives lost. And the not-so-innocent lives—her parents, for one. She

was saddened, yet… relieved. Some part of her was glad they were dead. A part she didn't wish to look at too closely for fear of what she might find lurking in those deep shadows.

Righteous anger and scarlet-hued joy. Violent and so unlike her. She was frightened by the heavy prospect of the thoughts swirling in her head.

Some sick and twisted part of her, shrouded in shadows and night, wished it had not been an easy death for them. At the very least, for her father. Her mother, she hoped, went gently and quietly. Luella hoped she had been afforded at least that one luxury in her life of opulent servitude.

With a wet, choked-up sigh, Luella rested her head on the ground, hands covering the sides of her face like she could ward off the sight of the congealed, blackened blood on the ground or the stone stage of the gallows glinting in her peripheral.

Her fate.

The vampire said he would keep her from death, but she feared a fate with him might be one even worse than the oblivion found in death's cold embrace. She shivered at the memory of his unnaturally cold hands against her skin—far colder than that of death, leeched of all warmth, and almost like the lifeless skin of a porcelain doll.

She knew vampires were feared creatures. Feared in a different way than the shifters or even the angels. They were coldly calculating, cunning, and conceited, partaking in all manner of things to fuel their voracious appetites. Appetites for blood. And for the flesh.

The shifters were known for their beastly, wild nature, like the beasts they could shift into, but the vampires didn't have a beastly counterpart; nothing to attribute to their violent natures except for themselves. It made them an enigma, a feared and preternatural being. That, combined with their Mind magic, and anyone would tuck tail and run at the mere mention of a vampire.

They were similar to the demons in that way. Stories spun of blood-soaked earth that proceeded their very presence. But the demons were the perfect coalescence of the shifters and the vampires. Known for their cold cruelty, yet still with a feral tinge.

The angels were akin to the fae— revered and more than slightly sanctimonious. Their shunned counterparts, the fallen, kept to themselves mostly. The most quiet and secretive of all the creatures, even the fae.

In the last few days, Luella had already met far more of the varying creatures populating the realms than she had in her entire existence. And it was enough for her to last the rest of her existence. However short it may be.

A mage, a shifter, a vampire, and whatever manner of being Graves was —he was inhumane, that much Luela did know.

Resting her back against the hard iron of the bars, she took in her surroundings, forcing the despair inside her down into the dark, swirling midst of vile thoughts.

It was fully dark now, and she struggled to make out the shadows in the distance. The swaying leaves around the small arena, circular shapes of apples dangling from their limbs. She could see tall sprigs of grass nestled in between the stone pathways, strange zigzag, maze-like patterns weaving to and fro throughout the large circle surrounding the raised steps leading to the gallows.

The blood, the decadent, glinting flesh of the apples—both a deep red.

Strange, she thought, *that two different things could both be the same shade; one gives life, and the other, a marker of death.*

Her eyes grew bleary, shapes blurring as a haze of sleep threatened to take her, but she refused it stubbornly. She didn't want to be taken advantage of.

Who knew what would be waiting for her while she was vulnerable here, trapped in this cage in the middle of dark loneliness?

And now, even in her sleep, she wasn't safe.

The vampire would come for her. He, with his promises and sinful words, had stolen into the safest spaces of her mind to plant seeds of doubt that she felt niggling against her subconscious like little, marching ants crawling against her skin.

She was no match for her foes here. She was alone. All alone.

A weary sigh escaped her.

Luella wasn't sure if being alone was such a good thing now.

Moments passed, turning to minutes, which turned to hours. But still, she did not sleep, for she did not want to dream.

Every time her eyes started to slip shut, she jerked with a start, the memory of a half-strangled scream resting upon the bruised skin of her lips and hands clenching in fury with remembered horrors.

She refused to sleep, and so, the hours of the night passed silently and quietly, with only the occasional chittering of animals in the gardens keeping her company. Softly squawking birds and the rustle of leaves as little animals of prey skittered about through tall grass and hopped between mossy rocks.

Another caw of a bird. Closer this time.

Her head perked up, tired eyes squinting in the darkness. She crawled across the ground, knees and palms against the rough ground of the cell as the tattered ends of her nightgown dragged through the dried blood. She was beyond caring now.

Luella’s hands curled around the iron bars, and her forehead pressed against them as she searched for the source of that all-too-familiar sound.

There.

She gasped.

A raven. Perched upon one of the larger rocks, wings spread wide as it stared right at her with piercing eyes.

The eyes were intelligent. Taunting in away.

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she remembered the raven that had watched her the other night. The night that started it all. It was there, watching her, perched upon her windowsill as she disrobed. It had been there like a warning of what was to come.

If only she had known.

If only.

It couldn’t have possibly been the same one.

"Just a coincidence," she mumbled to herself. The sound of her voice startled her. It had felt far too long since she had heard it; she licked her dry lips and spoke again: "A coincidence…"

She sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

It had to be mere chance.

But—

Luella held out a hand, fingers stretching out of the bars of the cage as she beckoned the raven to come to her.

"Hello," she whispered into the night. The cool air stole the word from her lips and carried it to the awaiting raven. Black wings fluttered as she spoke. "Don’t leave me alone. *Please."*

The raven’s head cocked to the side, an eery motion. Her skin tingled.

One last, lonesome caw sounded in the night before the raven took flight, wings flapping as it left. She tried to track where it went, but her sight wasn’t that sharp, and she lost it in the darkness.

Luella swallowed a vile curse that bubbled up, huffing as she thumped her head against the bars.

"Come back," she quietly pleaded, but the words were swallowed up into the night just as the raven had been—falling on unhearing ears. The only noise of acknowledgment: the whisper of air and rustle of leaves.

As she sat back on her heels, that’s when she noticed it.

Little torches in the distance, dancing and hopping along as the orbs of orange light grew closer, weaving between trees. A muttered symphony of sound in the distance. The wind carried sharp clangs and howling hoots to her ears, and she crouched back in her cell, her spine pressing into the unforgiving bars.

She knew those raucous cheers. The soldiers.

They were here.

It must have been in the middle of the night, for they took many hours longer to arrive than Tharen, Graves, and she, with the swift and relentless pace her two captors had set. The soldiers marched through the trees and stumbled over rocks, not at all quiet, for they knew *they* were the predators here. Anyone they stumbled upon in this orchard would be easy prey.

She pressed a hand to her chest in fear as she looked around the small cage she was trapped in. She was stuck. What once may have been a small mercy to be tucked away alone for the night turned into a trap. Luella recognized it for what it was. She had been left like bait to feed the starving pack of animals that would soon descend upon her, to feed their starving tempers.

They stumbled into the clearing, and she caught sight of a shifter breaking through the army of males, wearing the crest of Serpentis proudly on his chest. He shoved a tied-up male onto his knees—a prisoner—who wore fine silks of spun gold. His hair was golden yellow, and his ears were arched. A Solis fae.

Luella swallowed thickly, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that she felt like she may faint.

The soldier kicked the prisoner further into the ground, boot digging into his side as they all let out cheers. She heard a wail coming from somewhere inside the tightly packed group.

"No!"A female shoved through the soldiers, gleaming tears in her golden eyes.

The faint rays of moonlight and golden firelight from the torches made everything shaky and strange to Luella as she watched the prisoners. The female’s golden hair was fine as spun silk, and the orange glow made it shine from within. The female blinked up at the males around her, vicious and scared. Luella could see a bright wetness shining in her eyes as she threw her body over the male, shielding him with her shaking form.

"Get out of the way, or we’ll kill you too," the soldier sneered.

Luella was thankful they hadn’t yet taken note of her, but she knew her luck would run out. It always did. Her white gown was a beacon in the darkness of the cage, and she wrapped her arms tightly around her knees, covering herself as much as she was able.

The soldier jerked the female up by her arm, throwing her down behind him as another soldier pointed a steel-tipped sword at the prisoner’s throat.

"Please," the male prisoner begged. "Spare her. Take me only. She’s innocent."

The soldier tipped his head back, cajoling the others gathered around with an evil smile. "Innocent?" He bent forward, resting his hands on his knees as he watched the prisoner plead. "My wife was innocent, too, and it didn’t stop her from being infected. I watched as she *bit* our own child, nearly tearing a chunk out of her arm. I was forced to kill them both because of the darkness your *kind"*—the soldier gritted his jaw, a meaty hand coming up to wrap around the prisoner’s windpipe—*"*helped bring to power. The last thing my wife and child saw was me, driving a dagger into their chests so that I might save the rest of our village and stop them both from turning everyone else into shadows."

Fingers dug into the prisoner’s neck, crushing him. The male prisoner wheezed, eyes downturned and resigned as the soldier seethed.

"So, no. I don’t think I will spare her. I want you to watch and your last moments to be ungodsly as the fires of the Below. Maybe then you’ll realize how it feels to have everything taken from you."

The female was tugged up the steps and to the gallows, the male prisoner’s pleas following after her. Luella had never heard such a heartbroken sound before.

She wished she was braver. Maybe then she could call out and *do something*.

Anything would be better than silently watching death, but fear froze her, made her weak and trembling.

Luella pressed her head into her shoulder, listening to the sounds of wails and choking, the snap of a rope as it unfurled, and cheers as something thick thumped against the ground.

Peeking through where her hands were pressed over her eyes, she felt bile rise in her throat at the sight greeting her.

Two soldiers forced the female prisoner onto her knees, while the male prisoner's hands were fastened in a stock made of tarnished wood as he was forced to watch. A soldier wearing the crest of Nix brandished a serrated blade; the edges were like teeth and slightly rusted from far too much use. He raised the blade high above him, and the male prisoner let out one last whimpering plea as the female simply closed her eyes. Even from a distance, Luella could see the resignation on her features. She knew it was over.

In an executioner's blow, the soldier swung the blade. It perfectly arced down in a simple, quick motion against the back of the female's neck.

It was a clean cut.

Luella didn't look anymore…

She heard a thump as the headless body fell to the ground. The male was still screaming. It went on for some time. Until it stopped. A quick, short croak, and he made no more sound.

She thought it was over, then. But it wasn't.

More pleas, more screams of fear, and thumps of bodies. Cheers, strangled cries, and rowdy laughter. It continued for hours, it felt like.

All the while, her nose pressed firmly into her trembling shoulder, shaking hands covering her eyes as she rocked away, stifling whimpers that attempted to escape and reveal herself from where she was desperately trying not to attract their evil attention. It was selfish of her, but she didn't want the force of that wickedness directed solely on her.

Luella wanted them to ignore her and go away, far away. She wanted to be safe.

What a coward, her mind hissed.

Maybe she did deserve her fate.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, rays peaking through the clouds that had gathered in the sky, the cheers stopped, the screams died out, and she opened her eyes.

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10

DAMNED FATE

She waited like that until the sun had fully risen. Her knees tucked closely to her chest, hands gripping her thighs and keeping them securely folded to her body; an ever-present tremble to her shoulders, a constant stutter to her heart, a stirring of nausea in her stomach…

She didn't want to be here anymore.

Luella quivered like the taut string of a bow, poised to release. The skin of her arms felt far too cold under her palms. She was in shock, in denial.

It was daylight now, and in the light of the day, she could see the aftermath of the night.

Wet blood on the raised platform, dripping pools collecting on the sides and falling to the ground, puddling there like remnants of the lost souls that had pumped life throughout. Desolate and cold, barren and still. That blood would flow no longer in the veins of those fae. It would be washed away by the rain, soaked up by the earth. Stepped on and walked across.

She shuddered anew at the thoughts.

Would blood on the ground be all that was left of her?

There were no bodies. For that, she was grateful. She wasn't sure where they had been taken. Sometime during the night, when she shook and prayed to the gods and hummed low tunes under her breath to drown out the sounds, the soldiers must have carted them all away. Lifeless and fleeting, dumping the bodies into the woods of the Silva Noctis—an

enchanted, boundless forest along the eastern side of the castle grounds—as food for the wraiths and other beasts that lurked within.

Feet thumped against the stone pathway, a shuffling of noise that grew closer and closer to her.

She inched further back at the sound, not ready to face whoever was coming for her. She knew her time was up.

Graves appeared before Luella, hood over his head and cowl tightly wrapped around his lower face. All she could see were those eyes of lapis lazuli. The sun filtered through the apple trees behind him, mingling with the shadows and illuminating the darkness of the cloak that he wore.

The male dangled an iron key in front of him, the chain clinking like a promise.

"How was your night?" he asked as he fit the key into the lock, turning it with a resounding click.

Luella stood on shaky legs, her brain too addled to make sense of his words—the first words he had said to her directly. She wanted to accuse him of false niceties, even though he was not as harsh and overtly threatening to her, he was still her captor. No matter how peculiar and quiet he may be. No matter how strangely thoughtful or watchful his gaze was. She knew his kind; she had seen it in the hungry eyes of the few courtiers she had a chance to meet in Solis—kindness used as a mask to hide the real intent. Like a duplicitous voyeur, sitting back and plying her with soft-spoken words and graceful platitudes just to butter her up and make her sweet, supple, and ripe for the picking.

That's what he was. With his silent persona and guarded frame, he liked to sit back and watch. Watch her, watch the world, watch everyone.

"M-my night?" Luella croaked.

He hummed under his breath in answer, opening the doors and holding out a gloved hand for her in offering. "Yes, your night. I'm sure it was quite eventful for you."

"Don't a-act… like y-you care…" She stumbled over her words in her state of shock. She didn't feel quite right still. She could hear the echo of screams in her head, and she averted her gaze from the blood on the grounds behind him, instead focusing on his deep eyes, wishing she could drown in them and forget everything else.

Graves placed his hands on her shoulders, casting a weighted glance over her like he was taking in every minute detail and comparing it to the

female he saw yesterday. His eyes settled on the shake in her hands, the grey pallor of her skin. She saw his shoulders rise and fall sharply through his cloak as he took a steadying breath, steeling himself at whatever he saw on her face.

With a clearing of his throat, Graves turned her bodily and stood at her back as an imposing force. His hands skated against her shoulders and cascaded over her arms before he slowly took her wrists in one of his hands. He locked them together in his grip, and she felt the cool brush of silk against her rubbed raw skin as he looped the material around, keeping her hands locked tightly. His touch was gentle, tender. Almost like he was scared of frightening her.

"There," Graves mumbled. "Now he can have no qualms that I didn't keep you tied up. Knowing him, he'll be aggrieved that silk was used instead of rope."

Luella's brow furrowed as Graves spun her back around. She didn't have much else to lose besides her life, and she was already on the way to losing that, so she threw caution to the wind and asked, "Who is *he*?"

Graves started like he was surprised she had questioned him instead of merely taking everything quietly as she had been.

"The King." Graves moved closer, the material of his cowl scratching against her cheek. "The silks were a gift from Bastian, the King's Advisor." At Luella's indifference, he clarified, "The vampire… He instructed me to be gentle with you." The words were an uttered secret, and Luella was surprised that Graves was sharing anything with her.

So the vampire's name was Bastian—and he was the King's Advisor?

What could he want with her and her simple dreams?

Just as she started to ask, the grip around her wrists grew firmer, and his eyes narrowed. "Come. We don't want to be late."

Graves led her forward with a hand on her shoulder, and perhaps it was in her addled and traumatized state, but it was almost as if he led her as far away from the gallows as he could. He kept his body placed in front of the platform and the many tools that she knew were discarded on top of it.

He was so close to her; she couldn't help but breathe in his luscious scent. Heady, from how his large, cloaked body nearly surrounded her chilled, shaking form. It reminded Luella of hot tea sweetened with honey, drank in a bed of clovers.

"Why did t-they leave me alone?" She didn’t extrapolate. He knew what she meant. *Who* she meant.

He didn’t speak for some time, and she resigned herself to never receiving an answer to the question that had been pressing upon her mind all night.

Why did the soldiers leave her alone in her cage? Why did they not come for her?

They walked by the apple orchard, the dense trees growing light with every step, tangles of tall grass and tree limbs giving way to collections of pretty, manicured flowers and a pathway made of stone. The roughness of the path hurt her sore and aching feet, and she hissed as a rock cut into her heel, Graves slowing his pace slightly as she was obviously struggling. The pathway grew broader, opening up as it stopped in front of the palace. Right where Luella had arrived last night.

With the soft, golden light of the sun, she could pick out things she hadn’t seen before: painted green statues of snakes that curled up the railing of the staircase, a dragon statue in the distance, a bubbling fount set in its maw as water trickled over the stone lips and fell into a mid-sized pond.

It was a prettier courtyard than she expected for a kingdom of sin.

Graves led her up the stairs and into the palace. Guards were standing sentinel near the entry, and the large, gate-like doors opened with a flourish. Luella’s head craned to take in the sights of the castle. It was grand and different. Very different than she had anticipated. Many more fountains littered the entryway, bubbling brooks spilling crystalline water into pools set in corner grooves of the ground. The roof was arched and high; light filtered through the painted windows that acted as the ceiling, casting rainbows against the pure, white floors.

It was so quiet that even her bare feet echoed with every step. Graves was silent as a shadow behind her. His steps didn’t make any noise with his practiced gait. He knew this place, knew exactly where and how to step.

Just as they came to a stop at towering double doors, which opened with a mere brush of Grave’s fingers against the white surface, he leaned down as he whispered into the top of her hair, "The King ordered the soldiers not to touch you, only to scare you."

And with a harsh touch, Luella was shoved into the throne room. The almost comforting weight of Graves’s gloved hands left her as he

disappeared behind her to take a post with the other armed guards lining the walls.

Doors clanged shut behind her, and she was left standing alone in a dragon's den.

It was grand, fitting for the opulence of the rest of the castle. The throne was the centerpiece of the room, a golden carpet rolled right toward it, guiding her and cushioning her feet as she took soft, hesitant steps forward. But it was empty, thank the gods—perhaps that was why Luella did not pass out and felt confident enough to walk further into the room.

Windows lined the gold-painted walls, with arched tops, standing narrow and tall. The ceiling was a dome, with windows arcing upward from where they met at a center focal point above. The throne was large, made of tall, gold-brushed marble and polished stone with a cushioned seat, backed by weaved etchings of serpents winding over the armrests and racing up the back of the chair. Tall pillars lined the golden carpet, each with a guard stood still as the snake statues in the gardens. They were cloaked in regalia, all bearing the crest of Serpentis on their armor.

Luella's shoulders caved inward at their presence. She was a meek creature thrown into a pit of beasts. They would chew her up and spit her out, mangled, and she would have no chance of surviving it.

A smaller door was off to the side of the throne, nestled in a little nook made by the walls. A tapestry fluttered on the stone next to it, almost concealing it from view completely.

She came to a dead stop in the very center of the room, a stretch of carpet before her and a stretch behind—marking her as an unmoored castaway drifting in the belly of the beast.

The small door opened in a creak, and her fingers fluttered up to the hollow of her throat, resting there in trepidation.

The King…

A soft puff of air escaped her lips at the sight of him.

The King swept into the room like the mighty ruler he was. Steps unfaltering, head held high, and shoulders regal and broad. He was an unwavering source of power and might, rippling from him like waves. Morning rays of light filtered in through the dome of glass above, and it illuminated his golden hair and the golden crown perched atop his head, jewels shining like the purest of twinkling lights. With his unfettered regality and the slightly feral sort of beauty that wrapped him in a

predator’s pose, he was even more magnificent in the day. And even more terrifying.

A cape flowed behind him and brushed against the carpet as he came to take his seat on the throne. The many rings on his fingers caught the light as he gripped the armrests, and the green jewels in his crown sparkled just like his eyes.

The entire room was already hushed, but if it was even possible, it grew even more so. So silent, in fact, Luella feared the King could have heard the thumping of her heart from where he sat. His lips quirked up in a cruel smirk as though he heard her thoughts, and a tanned, perfect hand tapped once against his chin in thought.

"Come closer," the King beckoned. His voice boomed across the room, brooking no arguments. One of his fingers crooked as he called her forward, and the many jewels on his hands glinted in the light.

Luella felt a phantom’s brush against her shoulder blade, and she started, turning her head to see Graves, once more, standing silently behind her. She had never even heard him. Graves urged her onward; a strange look fell over his eyes—the only visible part of his face, peaking out through the recesses of his covering—before he drifted back to stand watch against the wall.

The King arched a brow as if in a challenge, and she wasn’t willing to risk stoking his impatience any longer. The cold-blooded shifters were not known for their kindness or patience. Her steps were hesitant and as quick as she could muster.

She came to stand just before him, her toes sinking into the plushness of the carpet underfoot. The light was startling and warm against her skin as it fell from the dome above. The King shifted, leaning up, and rested his elbows on his knees as he judged me with those cruel eyes of his; green glinted. The strong muscles in his neck rippled, a testament to the powerful beast lying under the guise of flesh and bone—a dragon, laying in wait and clawing against the bars of its corporeal cage and prowling along the edges.

He steepled his fingers as he peered down at her from his throne. A few steps led to the raised dais on which he sat. A paltry distance that separated them.

From a distance, Luella could trick herself into thinking it was all a dream, or that she was watching from above as everything was happening, a detached sort of coping. Now, this close, she couldn’t fool herself any

longer. She could see everything in vivid detail. The veins along his hands, the rings adorning his fingers, the shifting of his pupils and the slight slant at the corner of his eyes, the slope of his nose, and the strong curve of his jaw. It all came together for a cutting visage of an imposing ruler.

From the shadows of the alcove, the door opened once more, revealing the male she now knew as Bastian, the King's… *Advisor*. And the male of her dreams.

The vampire halted on the right-hand side of the throne, a sword attached to his hip. He rested his hand on it as his red-tinged eyes tracked her. The King turned his head, eyeing the Advisor, before quickly looking back to Luella. Like he couldn't stand to look away from her for long. She knew the feeling. She was utterly ensnared by him, and even though she felt some invisible weight on her shoulders, urging her to kneel and protect herself in the presence of this apex predator, she couldn't move. Trapped under the startling intensity held within his gaze. This room was a sordid temptation crafted just for her. Filled with glittering jewels and alluring voices and beckoning aromas.

Luella's chest rose as she inhaled, her toes curling in the lush carpet.

"And the Prima?" the King asked.

"He's coming," Bastian replied. His eyes flit to her before he looked away—the opposite of the King, like he was repelled by the pull between them instead of drawn by it. "He was preoccupied below with the… beast." He flipped open a pocket watch, which appeared nearly out of thin air; he counted down from five, the words a low mumble as his finger tapped absentmindedly against the golden rim of the watch. "Two… one."

And on the heels of the last number, the grand entry door banged open behind her.

She was torn from her stillness, turning with a start, only to see Tharen striding into the room in a flurry, three white wolves trailing closely behind him.

Those aren't shifters, Luella thought, *but normal wolves*.

Their size was a bit too average to be a shifter. Their eyes, a tad too animalistic.

Tharen's white hair was still adorned with many braids, and the chains that wove throughout the strands were greater in number than they were yesterday. His arched ears poked out from his hair, and a faint sheen of sweat was on his chest, visible by the incredibly low-cut shirt he wore. He

donned no armor today but still had his swords strapped over his back and another, smaller dagger on his thigh.

"Sit," the mage commanded the pack of wolves, and they did.

Luella eyed the trio of beasts with apprehension and curiosity as Tharen strode right past her, breezing a hand over her bound wrists as he swept by. He came to stand behind Bastian, clapping a hand against the vampire's shoulder.

With the two standing so close together, it was clear that Bastian was the slightest in stature, a few inches shorter than Tharen. But the Prima was taller than normal, a towering height of well over six and a half feet, if she had to guess. From the King's seated position, it was hard for me to gauge his size, but his proud shoulders strained against his silken shirt, and she remembered how imposing he had appeared as he swept into the throne room.

All of these males were large. And all predators.

She distantly wondered why Graves wasn't standing with them. She thought he was within the King's circle, but maybe she had been wrong in her assumption.

Tharen lowered his head to whisper something to Bastian, eyes on Luella as he spoke. She made out only one word—said a bit louder than the others as if he wanted her to hear.

"…dungeons."

The King cleared his throat, waving to Bastian with a lazy hand. "Call them in," he demanded.

"Open the doors!" Bastian's voice echoed throughout the room.

The soldiers standing near the front doors of the throne room quickly hurried to obey, opening the doors in a flourish.

Curious eyes tracked her as the room filled with subjects, all dressed in revealing clothing and glittering silks. Luella fiddled with her torn gown, fingers gripping the fabric so tightly that it was a wonder it didn't tear.

"I didn't expect my death to be such a public affair," Luella mumbled. Bastian flicked his eyes toward her, a curve to his mouth as the vampire ran his tongue over his bottom lip, and she could see a sharp fang peeking out, a reminder of what he had promised.

In a wave of quiet mumbles, the shifters fell into place behind her, and Luella could almost envision pitchforks waving in their hands, fingers pointing her way, and hisses of violence reverberating throughout.

The spot where Graves had stood along the wall was now hidden from her view by the throng of subjects, and something about that made her throat feel tight with raw emotion. She knew he was still watching her, could feel hot pricks on her exposed skin from his eyes—attention that was more palpable than that of the watching eyes of the many subjects around her.

"King Vale Halston Arsalan," Bastian proclaimed, and the room grew silent in a mere instant.

Vale. It was a regal name, Luella thought.

The King stood, cloak falling to the floor and pooling around his feet. He towered over her, and she knew even if it weren't for the steps adding to his height, he would still dwarf her. She stumbled back a step but was stopped quickly, a telltale brush against her lower back as Graves passed. His eyes met hers, and he surreptitiously shook his head, eyes narrowing as he stood on the opposite side of the King—his left.

"Kneel," King Vale ordered Luella, one hand stretched out with his palm facing down. So close, she could reach out and brush her fingers against his.

She wondered if his skin would be warm. Or cold like the scales of the dragon.

She lowered her head, suddenly all too aware of her scant clothing and haggard appearance. The blood was itchy where it had dried against her flesh, and her skin tingled with the desire to scrub herself raw and scour the memory of everything she had endured under piping-hot water.

"*Kneel*," he seethed the order, voice like ice.

Her wide eyes met Bastian's, and though the vampire didn't move, she was grounded by him.

And so she knelt.

Her knees hit the carpet before the throne, and she wished her hands were free to cover where the material of the nightgown shifted to the side, torn almost to the junction where her thighs met her hips.

A small wave of victory crested over her from behind as the crowd let out little cheers and noises of satisfaction. Her heart was still beating much too swiftly. She could feel her pulse pounding through the thin skin under her wrist as she clasped her hands together. Pulling on the silken ties keeping her hostage, she tried to find some last saving grace against her impending fate.

But if her hands were free, what would she even do? What *could* she do?

Nothing.

"We are here today in victory of conquering the kingdom of Solis and the Solis fae." The King sat back on his throne, a crooked leg resting over his knee before he gestured to her with a hand. "Princess Luella Ilis Eritrais, the last of the Eritrais line," he all but sneered, and Luella startled at the faint scent of smoke permeating the room; grey wisps of it trailed along the carpet. "The last living fae of the Solis monarchy! We took her as a captive. As a *reminder*. Serpentis is victor today, victor yesterday, and tomorrow, we will prove victor again!"

The subjects cheered, but she didn't raise her head, keeping her eyes trained firmly on the golden carpet below.

The King fisted a hand and roughly thumped it against his heart. "Hear me! This *heirus*," he pointed toward her, eyes like sharp daggers as they dug into her skin. "Is nothing more than a trophy. We will keep her to remember what the kingdom of Serpentis can accomplish. She will not die this day."

Something in the pits of her chest unraveled at the words, coils of tension let loose. She wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not—would it be better to die or to live as a prisoner?

Clamoring howls sounded from behind her. Rebuttals to the King's proclamation.

"*No*!"

"Kill her!"

"Hang her in the gallows like the rest."

The words were a storm of war cries, and her skin tingled in fear. She looked up from under her lashes, eyes falling on the King as he sat before her. He met her gaze with a look of triumph, and she could do nothing but cower under the force of it.

Luella watched the other males standing behind him. Imposing forces, shoulders strong and proud, three additional sets of eyes that never left her.

Graves rested a hand on his chest, gloves fingers tapping against his sternum, almost as if it were some odd habit… or act of comfort. Tharen's icy blue eyes were trained on her; she knew from the short time she had been around him that he was well-versed in combat, and with his powers of the Mind and Body, he probably could pick up on her feelings better than

she could, herself—the rate of her pulse, the labored sound of her breath. He likely knew it all.

And Bastian. He was proud and seductively beckoning, red-tinted eyes unflinching as they bore into her. Almost smug, in a way, with the curve of his plush upper lip. Like he was taunting her with a silent, *I told you so*, weighing between them like a secret. He promised she wouldn't die. He had followed through thus far. But the vampire had also promised she would be his. Luella would rather die than have that come to fruition.

King Vale raised his hand to temper the uproar ringing throughout the room. "Silence!"

The room fell into a hush so quickly that it made her dizzy.

"You dare to question me?" King Vale stood, forearms resting on the armrests of his throne, fingers curling around the snake statues woven around the golden-brushed marble.

Luella sat back, heart stuttering as the King took a step down…. closer to her.

Wished she could move away from him, but she knew if she tried, she would be stopped. Graves would somehow know, somehow catch it, even if it were an infinitesimal movement. He seemed utterly in tune with every little move that she made.

The King stopped right before her, now on level ground where she was kneeling. A firm hand twisted in her hair, and he roughly tugged her head back. She let out a sound in protest as she felt his fingers dig into her scalp and tangle with her golden curls—unkempt and frizzy, dirty and blood-matted. The pads of his fingers brushed throughout them, and she was loathe to admit how good it felt to have someone touch her. Even under the guise of a blatant threat.

One sharp twist, and he could snap her neck.

For years, she had been starved of touch, starved of affection. And captivity, it seemed, would be the first time she would be touched like she meant something. Even if that *something* was filled with loathing. Hate and love walked alongside each other. It was apathy she could not stand. The absence of all feeling.

The strap of her torn slip fell off her shoulder as the King tugged her to stand. Before him, on equal footing, with no raised dais to separate them, he towered over her. He was easily over a foot taller than her. Her shoulders came to his stomach.

The velvet of his cape brushed along her bare arms from how close he was standing to her, and she shuddered at the heat radiating from him. She never would have expected a dragon shifter to feel so warm. Perhaps it was the fire simmering under his skin, held within the beast caged inside him.

A warm hand spanned the scant space between them as he enclosed her upper arm, fingers encircling it completely. He *was* warm, enticingly so. And as he pulled her flush to his side, the crown of her head was tucked under his shoulder. Though she couldn’t see them from her position, she felt the other males shift behind her, a surge of energy like they were affronted by the King’s handling of her.

The subjects before her were like faceless beings. In her shock, she couldn’t focus on anything, only feelings and sensations.

"Luella Eritrais is under my protection," the King decreed. "Anyone who dares to lay a hand on her will receive punishment as though they have attempted an act of violence against me. Her life is my life now. Harm her, and you’re harming me. Punishment will be a far worse fate than death."

Bastian stood on her other side, and she felt trapped between the two males. His cool hands ghosted along her back and came to a stop at her bound wrists, a finger hooking on her pinky. The touch was hidden from the masses in front of them. But not from Graves and Tharen, standing behind her. The touch would be clearly visible to them, and she knew they both would see the counterfeit familiarity held within such a touch.

Luella desperately wanted to remove his touch, yet clasp their fingers tighter at the same time.

"Dismissed," Bastian stated, and with that, everyone left.

A trickle of scathing glares and hissed words as they exited through the grand double doors, which gave a resounding bang as they closed behind the last trailing courtier.

Immediately, Luella felt her shoulders start to shake, which she had desperately tried to ward off in the face of the vicious crowd. Now, with only the stoic guards keeping watch along the walls, the strange triad of wolves, and the four males before her, she felt her legs weaken.

Bastian wrapped a hand around her arm, gently pulling her away from where she was tucked to the King’s side.

"I told you, you would live, pet. Let this be a lesson, do not ever doubt me again." His warm mouth pressed to the top of her hair as he whispered

the words, a hand quickly undoing the knot in the silk material that kept her wrists bound.

The feel of the vampire’s breath against her made her shiver. How could someone so cold have such warmth?

Free of the bindings, she pushed against his lower stomach, shoving him off of her. He was hard and unyielding—like a marble statue. As he stepped away from her, Luella knew it only because he let her push him. She rubbed at her aching wrists, feeling the heavy presence of King Vale against her back.

"Just because you live does not mean you are not a prisoner. Know your place," the King seethed, spinning her around to face him. She felt Bastian tense behind her, warily watching the King as he spoke. "You are to be a mere spoil of this war, a reminder of what Serpentis is capable of. Of what *I* am capable of. Do well to remember these words because Serpentis is not the enemy that you think we are, heirus." King Vale forced her back a step, green eyes glinting as he waved over Tharen and Graves. "Prima, Graves, take our captive to the dungeons. I’ve already had a place prepared for her. You’ll know it when you see it." He said the final words with a low chuckle —some private joke amongst them.

"You said she would live," Bastian hissed, pulling her back flush to his chest.

"You’re right. I did say she would live. But make no mistake. I did not say *how* she would live. Just that she would not die. Remember your fucking place, Advisor. There’s a spot in the dungeons with your name on it. You should know by now I have no hesitations about damning one of my own to a life within a cage."

The few bits of hope that had bloomed from the King’s proclamation died out. She was so, so naive. Condemned down below in a dark, musty, cold cell. She shivered.

While something else gnawed at her… There appeared to be dissension within the King’s ranks. His Advisor was not privy to all of King Vale’s whims. Bastian had been slighted. It sounded as though he had taken up for her life, saving it but condemning her simultaneously.

As Graves stepped forward to take Luella away, King Vale gave her one last look. Eyes perusing her, taking note of her ragged appearance, before coming to rest on her face. The King met her eyes with a flicker of interest. A clash of emerald and sapphire. Not a peaceful union—but a discordant

symphony, like a concerto with all the wrong notes, slightly out of tune, yet something about it alluded to a manner of rightness, if only a few things were shifted.

"We are destined. Etched into the very marrow of the world’s bones, so too is our meeting. You’re mine."

With a sweep of his cape and the words ringing between them, King Vale left.

Bastian’s dark brow pinched as he looked over his shoulder at her before trailing after his King, his fangs peeking out in a lethal promise.

"Let’s go, Princess." Tharen stood behind her, a hand settling on her shoulder. Frigid ice melted against her skin. From this close, she caught a whiff of soft vanilla underneath the harsh bite of his scent. It brought a subtle allure to his harsher edges. Incongruous with his near rabid demeanor.

Graves wrapped his gloved hand around her wrist, leading her to the door nestled in the alcove. The warmth filtering in through the skylight left her, and the cold embrace of the shadows enveloped her. The small door clanged behind her as Graves led her from the front, and Tharen urged her on from behind—held prisoner from either side by her captors.

Trapped and unable to escape, Luella walked toward her fate.

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PART II

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11

THE DUNGEONS

"Watch your step."

Luella’s foot hovered over nothing, and she gasped, fingers grasping a firm arm in the darkness as she attempted to steady herself.

She had almost fallen, teetered right over the edge and down below.

Tharen settled a hand on her lower back, fingers spreading out against her torn slip as he righted her. She gave a sharp inhale at the touch, his finger skimming along a bare bit of her skin from how her gown had torn. The sound of her breathing was far too loud in the quiet darkness.

She itched for a change of clothes. Something clean and comfortable that smelled of home. Sunkissed ground and warm herbal tea brewed from the heat of the sun in the summertime. She would never again have such a comfort—have any of her well-loved comforts.

Head lowered, her eyes strained in the darkness as she tangled her fingers in the back of Graves’s cloak, she was careful not to touch him but needed a guide in this looming darkness she was being led through. He stiffened under the touch, her hands tugging slightly against his cloak. But he did not look back at her.

Their eyes were far better than hers, she knew. The fae were second to the humans when it came to physical prowess and senses; far more delicate creatures, sensitive to much and suspectable to many an ailment or injury.

Without magic, that was a large part of why her parents had kept her hidden away. That… and out of embarrassment.

The doorway had immediately given way to a winding staircase, circling down and down to a pit of total darkness. Her throat tightened from the drop below. She couldn’t quite see the full expanse of the drop in the dark, but she could sense it. An echoing cavern of hollowness. There were no railings or guardrails to keep her safe. One little tumble, and she would fall into nothingness.

She wondered if maybe it would be a swifter end than the future she so hesitantly walked toward.

The echo of her bare feet bounced off the walls above and skittered down below. Her breath was far too loud to her own ears. Slightly panicked and short. More than just mere exertion and exhaustion. Fear. It clouded her mind and riddled her bones with little aftershocks. She was tired, she was weary, but far more than that, she was afraid.

A small niggling thought in the depths of the shadows where her magicless soul lay wished the soldiers from last night had killed her, too. She would be nothing more than an empty shell, thrown to the wolves or turned to ash in the fire pits where bodies were burned.

In exhaustion, her shoulders caved inward, steps faltering as she stumbled to the side, threatening to fall.

"Almost there," Tharen whispered into her ear from behind her. She wanted to believe him, even though she knew it wasn’t smart.

But where would she be without hope?

Just when Luella felt she could walk no more, when her feet felt like lead and her eyes drooped, they arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

Graves parted away from the front, a gloved hand reaching back for her as he turned. "This way."

Tharen shoved her forward, herding her into Graves’s awaiting arms.

The room was dank, musty, and dark—just as she had imagined. An endless sea of cages lined the walls. Iron doors with fortified bars and ceilings with low, sharp points. As she nearly fell into Graves, her bare foot splashed in a puddle of what she hoped was water. In the darkness, it was hard to tell.

A sharp crackle and fire was born. Luella whipped her head around, only to see Tharen waving a hand, red-orange flames dancing along his palms and curling over his fingers. It cast shadows on his face and made his

features appear even more severe and scary. The hollows of his cheeks and the sharpness of his jaw were more pronounced.

She gulped.

He looked like one of the monsters lurking in shadowy corners that her nursemaids used to warn her of.

With his other hand, Tharen snapped a finger, and in a cascading flow, the rusted sconces attached to the walls lit up in flames. One after the other, they sparked to life at the mere wish of the Prima. He was powerful. That sort of magic… Even the most practiced of fae would take years to be able to master such an act with careless leisure. Not even a wrinkle of concentration marred his brow. He was a vetus, she was almost positive. Though the other creatures did not abide by the fae terminology, Luella knew in her bones that he was well over five centuries. It was evident in the ease of his magic, the set of his shoulders, and the knowledge sparkling in those ice-like eyes.

"After you, Princess." Tharen smirked, waving a hand in mock flourish as Graves pulled her onward.

Under the light of the flickering candles, with the warmth emitting from Tharen’s palm, she could see the cavernous space of the dungeons in vivid, orange-tinted detail. The water that dripped from the low ceiling fell in puddles along the floor, her bare feet lithely dancing around to avoid. A rather large rat scurried along, disappearing into the small hole in the cracked stone of the walls.

I will die here, she distantly thought.

No one could survive in these conditions, but as a fae—and an heirus, at that—she would meet her end by some disease long before the King could decide she was better dead himself.

Bastian had sworn she would not die, but it seemed they were determined to kill her passively anyway.

Luella’s shoulders trembled from a gust of frigid air that swept throughout the dungeons like a promise. The gallows would have been a quicker end than here…

"Surely the King can’t mean for me to live here for the rest of my d-days?" Luella couldn’t help but inquire, though her voice was soft, meek. Scared. "I’ll die of sickness far sooner than I think he’d like for a war trophy."

Graves’s thumb dug into her wrist. "We’ll keep watch. Don’t fret. King Vale will not allow you to die."

"But I might," Tharen mumbled from behind her.

"We’re not like you. The mages," she explained as she eyed Tharen, before tilting her head to gesture to Graves. "And whatever you are… The fae aren’t like you. We don’t have good senses or swift healing. All it will take is a little cold, and you may not be able to do anything for me."

"All the better," Tharen intoned. "If it was up to me, I would have run my dagger across your throat when I captured you."

"Don’t listen to him. He’s not quite… all there." Graves’s cowl caused the words to be mumbled.

Tharen raised his fire-filled fist in fury, poised to throw. "Say that again."

Graves grew silent at the threat, but it wasn’t from fear. The shadowed male seemed as deadly as the mage, just a quieter sort of deadliness. And sometimes, the quiet was far more dangerous.

Why gloat if you didn’t feel inferior in some way? Those who quietly lived and silently worked were the most lethal, after all.

From watching the pair, Luella was picking up on a semblance of a hierarchy within their ranks. King Vale was at the top, of course, and Graves somewhere at the bottom. Unsure where Tharen and Bastian fell. The Advisor versus the Prima—which title held more weight? She was inclined to say Bastian was below the King, but something about the way King Vale had threatened the vampire made her pause. Maybe Tharen was higher in rank than the Advisor? Only time would tell. And time, it seems, Luella would be having a lot of.

All of the cells were empty. It was far more quiet than she imagined the dungeon of an infamously cruel King would be. She expected each cell to be filled with raving beasts and traitors. The eery silence she was met with instead was jarring.

The hallway diverged into two paths, and Graves led her to the right, the floor slanting slightly as they descended even further.

Any further, and they might very well stumble across a gateway to the pits of the Below, she thought. The place of her nightmares. Demons and infernal beasts, with lava flowing freely in the streets and oozing from the walls—if the picture books she used to read were of any value.

The air grew even colder as they descended, and her arms pebbled with the chill. The fabric of her tattered gown brushed against her nipples, and she tucked her free arm over her chest, trying to preserve some modicum of decency. Tharen, who was walking beside her, eyed the motion; the fire in his hand seemed to burn brighter, if only for an instant, before he tamed it back down to a more controlled flame.

Graves came to a dead stop at one particular cell. It looked the same as all the others, the size of a servant’s quarters. A pallet on the ground pushed to the wall, and an empty bucket on the other side. Water ran in rivulets down the walls and collected in the cracks of the stone. She already felt the very tips of her fingers become numb from the icy coldness permeating the space.

Tharen slotted a key into the lock, pushing open the doors of the cell as he leaned against it, half in and half out, watching her take in her new home.

What was so special about this cell from all the others? She could see no difference. But it was chosen by the King for whatever reason, and she hoped she never found out. With the King’s sinister smirk as he condemned her to the dungeons, she could only suspect something was lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce.

Graves ran his hand over the ends of her hair, the strands spilling from his fingers as he retreated. "I’ll be back." His voice, a low whisper; deep blue eyes shining in the flickering flame, the only thing she could make out from his covered form. His cloak swept behind him in his haste to leave, and she watched him go with something strange winding in her belly.

Alone with Tharen, Luella hesitantly peeked up at the mage, his thick arms crossed over his chest. His hair appeared more golden from the orange glow of the fire, less like the stark white she knew it to be. It softened his appearance and made those faint notes of vanilla seem more prominent.

"Try not to sleep too deeply tonight, Princess. Best be awake for the things that go bump in the night." Tharen knocked a hand on the wall, the thud reverberating throughout the void space of the dungeons.

Luella gulped and skirted around him, her head brushing his forearms in the small space of the entryway as she entered the cell. He shifted, blocking the door completely and filtering out the last of the light from the sconces behind him. The flames in his palm extinguished in a swift *woosh*, casting her in almost total darkness.

"Until next time," he taunted, leaving her in a flurry as the door clanged shut, and he retreated swiftly down the hall.

Luella sank to her knees, back pressing against the stone walls. Dampness against her thighs from the wet ground, wetting her dress and making her skin erupt with even more chilled bumps. She wrapped her arms around her legs, pulling her knees closely to her chest.

Without her permission, she could feel her body finally break down against the exhaustion battering against her, eyes drooping shut and head falling back against the wall.

A soft exhale, and Luella was asleep, though none too restfully.

Something tickled against her fingertips.

Luella scrunched her nose, burrowing further into the blanket curled around her and batting away the strange brush against her palm.

These sheets don’t smell like home, she thought sleepily.

Her nose crinkled at the offensive scent. No, definitely not the soft downy of her silken bedsheets. These were dank. Musty and old, like the moth-eaten, yellowed pages of books tucked in the far reaches of a library.

She sneezed, hand coming up to rub her nose.

Humming a soft and bleary sound of exhaustion, she rolled onto her back, kicking off the blanket from where it had been draped over her legs, the ends of the fabric bunched strangely against the iron bars of the cell. Her fingers curled, fists clenching and unclenching as she let out a yawn. Her aching muscles stretched, even to the very tips of her toes—toes that were far too frozen.

Luella cracked open an eye, seeing a stone ceiling with lines of fissures. It was dark, only a few flickering flames outside the cell that barely did anything to illuminate the space. The slow drip of water and her breath were the only sounds.

She shot up with a gasp, her hand pressed over her beating heart as she forgot all about musty sheets and a tickle on her fingertips.

"No," Luella breathed, looking around the cell she was trapped in. "It wasn’t a dream." The words were a painful moan and cry of despair as she ran her fingers through her matted hair.

Tears welled in her burning eyes. Sleep still addled her mind; shock and overwhelming tiredness caused her brain to feel fuzzy and out of sorts.

Her head fell to her knees, shaking hands rubbing against the bare, bruised skin of her legs. Purple bruises bloomed over her porcelain skin, scratches and reddened cuts littering almost every bit of exposed skin. Not to mention the dried blood. Hers… or from someone else.

Tears fell over her lashline, marking a crystalline trail down her dirty cheeks. She felt frozen. Numb. From more than just the chill of the dungeons, but from grief and trauma.

Luella knew this would be her future. She was doomed to rot in this cell until she drew her last breath. She could only hope it came quickly, onset by some disease the rats carried or a weakened immune system from the lack of nutrients and frigid temperature.

Fingers gripping the ratty blanket, she settled back down on her little mat—barely more than a half-inch pad of a worn and stiff mattress, riddled with stains she *really* didn't want to know the origins of—and pulled the rough fabric up to her chin, facing the iron bars.

That was when she saw it.

Suddenly, she remembered what had awoken her in the first place.

Luella screamed. It echoed throughout the space. She jerked back, hitting the other side of the cell bars, scooting as far away as she could. She held her hands out in front of her as if to ward off the creature lying in wait in the cell right beside hers.

Horns. Big, curving horns sprouted from a mass of wavy hair that fell over tanned, glistening skin. Amber eyes gleamed in the darkness. Similar to a feline's luminescent gaze. They reflected the light and lured her in, watching like a predator.

A demon.

Luella knew why King Vale had been so intent on her having this particular cell. They had trapped her right next to a demon.

Iron bars separated them from where their two cells butted up against each other. She could easily stick her whole arm through and reach him. He was large, far larger than any of the other males, even from his crouched position on the other side of the cell. Tanned fingers curled around the bars. His shoulders were massive. Easily the span of three or maybe even four of her. She wondered what kept him from bending the iron bars. An

enchantment? The cells must have been spelled because this demon appeared far too powerful to be kept in a mere cage of iron.

He drew closer, horns knocking against the bars. Amber eyes pierced right through her. A dark brow pressed against iron as his attention never left where she was cowering far away from his reach, knees tucked to her body and hands outstretched in a mockery of a weapon. Her shoulders shook, and she felt trapped under his stare.

She flinched back from his cold stare but grew perplexed when he suddenly fell to the ground, head pressed to the dirty floor of the cell.

"Princess," he whispered. Awe clouded his voice. "You've finally come to me."

His voice was gentle, hands flexing against the floor as he kept his head lowered, waiting for her response.

Luella felt confused.

What was this?

This beast… this demon. Bowing to *her*?

"W-what are you…" she trailed off.

The demon looked up at the sound of her voice and swallowed heavily, mouth parted as he took her in. "Gods," he drew a short breath. "You sound like an angel from the Above. Divine."

Okay. She had *really* lost it. Maybe she had died… or was still asleep? This was all far too strange to be anything but a dream. She pinched her thigh, hoping to wake herself up.

Nope, definitely not dreaming, if the sting in her thigh was anything to go by.

The demon's alluring amber eyes tracked her movements. Something about the way he kept his head bowed as if to not scare her off made her think this demon wasn't a threat. But that was absurd. A beastly creature like that could kill her in an instant, just for the pleasure of hearing her screams of anguish and the sordid snap of bones.

But he wasn't moving, hands pressed to the dirty ground. The warm flicker of the fire did the opposite of what it did to Tharen—it softened this demon's features, smoothing out the hollows of his cheeks and blurring the sharp edges of his strong browbone.

Luella's shoulders slowly slumped, her hands lowering as she fisted them in the skirt of her nightgown. The demon didn't *seem* to want to kill

her. With every little invisible tick of time passing in utter silence and stillness, she grew more and more firm in her resolve—and more curious.

She scooted closer, a mere centimeter, and the demon's head perked up at the action, eyes brightening in some strange look of happiness that she was comfortable enough to let her guard down.

But Luella did not grow complacent. She had learned her lesson.

"I won't harm you. *Never*," the demon vowed.

"W-why should I believe you? How do I know…" She swallowed, mouth dry as sand. "How do I know that you're telling the truth?"

He hummed under his breath, a low purr of pleasure.

It seemed like the demon loved her voice, she thought, perplexed. What a strange creature. So unlike the stories of the demons of the Below she had grown up hearing. Creatures that reveled in suffering just for the sake of it—taking and hurting and setting fire to anything that held a whisper of goodness.

"What do you know about my kind?" he asked. He didn't expand upon what kind he was. He knew that *she* knew. It was clear as day from the gleaming amber of his eyes, the curved horns, and the unnaturally large set of his frame. A warrior. A beast. Forged in the pits of the Below and crawling from pools of bubbling lava with ash on his tongue.

Luella shook her head, voice a tiny thing. "Not much."

"Then you will have to trust me. My kind, we do not take lightly vows and promises. Most especially those forged in blood." In a sudden movement, he lifted his index finger, slicing it across one of his horns. Blood beaded from the tip, and he pressed it to his chest. Right over his heart. It left a faint smudge of scarlet on his tanned, bare chest. "And this day, I vow to you. I vow to always protect you, my Princess. You have my word and unwavering loyalty. No harm should befall you—from my hand or that of another. I will give my life for yours."

Luella jerked back, stunned by the profession. A blood oath. Not just the demons used them, but all creatures. They were binding. Sacred. And a *demon* had just sworn in blood to not only refrain from harming her, but also to give his life for her protection.

Shuddering, overcome by some strange emotion, she felt… safe somehow. And against her better judgment, she crawled across the short distance to him, her bruised knees pressing against the iron bars. Small, pale hands curved around them, fingers almost touching his.

She looked up at him from under her lashes, and from her vantage point sitting on her thighs with a small, fear-stricken tremble to her shoulders, she felt utterly eclipsed by him. His fingers flexed against the bars at her nearness, but he did not move them from where they firmly grasped the rusted iron. He let her come to him, but Luella was too afraid to broach that last little distance between their hands, so he seemed to resign himself to breathe in her scent, eyes closed and nostrils flaring.

It was all so humble—this large creature, this feared demon, cowed by her presence and scent. Luella couldn’t wrap her head around it.

"You can’t possibly mean to give your life for mine," she breathed.

"Oh, but I do, angel." He lifted his head, smoldering. His gaze was reverent, looking at her like she was the force that kept the world spinning, like hands that held the stars up in the sky or the breath of wind that whistled through the trees.

No one had ever called her such a sweet name before. No one had ever looked at her like that before. The sobriquet was quaint. Familiar. She preened under the warmth imbued within the word, heart echoing a pitter patter of nerves.

She felt torn in two. One half of her—the broken and beaten parts desperate for affection and comfort after being so traumatized—warred with the logical side of her. He was a demon; he could kill her, reach his hands through the bars, and snap her neck in an instant. Yet, his words… they were so kind, so carefully uttered. A blood oath binding him to protect her, full of reverent intent. She felt inclined to trust him, no matter how foolish it may be.

Besides, he couldn’t harm her now. The blood oath made sure of it. If he were to break it… Luella shuddered. He would face the wrath of the gods. His body would be leeched of all magic, soul sucked from his very insides, leaving him an empty husk.

Even so. Perhaps she *was* desperate. Desperate for affection, safety, and security. Maybe Luella had been too broken, and in that brokenness, an intense desire for protection was born. She felt as though she could cling to him, throw caution to the wind, and allow herself to find solace in this deadly beast. It felt like it could be easy after being surrounded by such treachery the last few days. A hint of kindness, and she folded like the pages of a book, pliantly turning to the whim of the reader.

Deep within, her soul called her to him. Even if it was the shock making her pliant and numb, she had nothing left to lose, save her life—if she could even call this ungodsly existence that. Not much of a life, just the act of drawing breath and having a beating heart. Her existence was not her own; at least she owned her soul and heart and mind. She would not give those away.

Luella shook her head in disbelief. She noticed the demon's expression had become less tense at her acquiescence, shoulders relaxing as he let out a deep breath that washed over her in a neighboring, calm wave.

He smelled of cocoa, bitter and sharp with an underlying note of sweetness. It was pleasant. Made her think of winter's nights by the fire, stirring a wooden stick in a fire-forged clay mug filled with melted chocolate and goat's milk.

"What do they call you?" Luella asked, in offer for tentative companionship. "I'm Luella." She decided to leave out her last name, lest this demon knew of her family and held some grudge—everyone she had run into here seemed to hate her for one reason or another, and she couldn't bear to lose this blooming companionship and be left alone again.

"Azgorath Da'amith," the demon said, lowering his head once more, a fist coming to rest against his heart as his other hand outstretched, held to the bars between them. It hovered right over Luealla's chest… Where her heart beat at a steady pace. It appeared to be some demon greeting.

She wasn't versed in the ways of the Below, and she didn't want to do anything to offend this beast and risk having him take his ire out on her. Even if he had made a blood vow to never harm her, she didn't want to risk it. So, she copied the motion. A fist over her heart and a hand outstretched toward his awaiting palm.

The demon—*Azgorath*, she reminded herself—opened his mouth in pleased shock, features slackening, hard jaw and slightly slanted eyes growing soft. His dark brow furrowed as he regarded her, eyes never breaking away. His stare pinned her like a moth to a specimen board, and she licked her lips, shackled by this strange beast and his unwavering attentiveness. One who should detest her, should reach through the bars and strangle the life out of her, crush her throat in those large, scarred hands. It was more unnerving to her that he did none of these things.

Azgorath pressed his head against the bars. "I must remind myself, you don't know what you're doing." He sounded pained, voice strained.

"What?" she questioned, hands lowering.

In her plight to not offend him, had she anyway? She started to inch back, but he caught her hand, a spark traveling up her arm from where they touched. She jerked it back, scared, and held her hands close to her chest.

He pressed closer. It was like he was trying to meld himself to the bars, become one with them, and get as close to her as possible.

"Nothing. Forget I said anything," he paused before tacking on, "Luella." He said her name like he was tasting it, rolling the letters around on his tongue. "Lu, my Lu," he then decided, like he was choosing the name for her, seeing what fit better.

"Azgorath." Luella stumbled over his name. A demon one, that was for sure. It was a mouthful. Sounded all wrong coming from her, nothing like the delicate, lyrical fae names she was used to. "Can I call you Az?" she hesitantly inquired.

"You can call me anything. Do anything, say anything, I am yours, Lu."

Before she could settle on the weight his words held, a yawn threatened to crack her jaw, and she felt her eyes droop in tiredness. She wasn’t sure how long she had been able to sleep, but it didn’t feel like a long time. She was weary, beyond mere tiredness. It settled in her limbs and weighed down her bones. She felt she could sleep for an eternity.

Az stretched out a hand between the bars, quietly waiting for her to meet his touch. She warily answered his silent call, slowly placing her palm in his. He grasped her hand gently, thumb softly tracing along the lines on her palm. "You should try to rest some more. You’ve had a long day. I’ll watch over you. Feel at ease, my Lu."

She nodded, incredulous. The demon tracked her movements as she shifted to lie down, and she tried not to think too hard about falling asleep in his presence.

A lamb awaiting the lion to pounce.

Luella had no other choice. She faced him, head right near his lap. The only thing that separated her from him: the iron bars of the cage. She imagined that barrier was gone, envisioning a warm lap under her cheek, pillowing her head.

Like Az could hear her thoughts, he reached a hand through the bars, twining thick fingers in her hair. His touch was tender as he brushed through the strands, humming under his breath. He carded his fingers

through tangles and knots, causing her eyes to shut unbidden as she was lulled to rest. Lulled by him.

Her breath evened out, and right before sleep pulled her under, she could hear faint words whispered over her like a prayer. Some language unknown to her, but she could feel the power radiating from the words, a singular echo of hushed adoration and choked-up pleas wrapped into one.

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12

SOFTLY STOLEN SOLACE

The next few days passed like that…

Days of Luella waking with a chill in her bones and Az sitting like a guard, resting his back on the bars between them. She would spend time pacing along the short length of the cell, bare feet slapping on the ground and hopping over dirty puddles of water. Food was brought by a guard, a different one each time. Meager sustenance; slop, really. Stale, hard bread and chunks of dried meat. She ate the bread, even though she struggled to get it down, but she didn't touch the meat. Az seemed to love it, trading her his bread for her meat. It became a little system. He would coax her into finishing her small loaf before gently nudging his through the bars to her. It tasted like ash in her mouth, dry, crumbling, and lacking in flavor.

The other males never showed up. Even though Graves had left with a promise to see her again, Bastian saying the same as she was led from the throne room. She tried not to feel like she had been forgotten and left to rot here.

Luella and her strange, beastly neighbor grew closer, asking each other random questions to pass the time. Some, he would answer easily. But others would cause him to grow quiet and solemn, leading Luella to bite her lip and utter a soft apology. She wouldn't dare do anything to upset him. Not when he was her only point of connection.

The end of the day—or what she thought was the end, it was hard to tell without any natural light—saw her curled up against the cold iron,

shivering in her thin, torn gown. Az would murmur low words over her as she fell asleep, lullabies and foreign prayers. He only wore thin leather pants with rips at the knees. Otherwise, he would have given her his shirt, he had told her.

She wasn’t sure exactly how long had passed. Perhaps a week? It was hard to tell. There was no way to tell the passage of time other than the meals, which were brought at random intervals to keep them out of sorts, no doubt.

Luella let out a lengthy sigh, tilting her head to the side to watch Az. He was lying down, knuckles knocking over the iron bars as he trailed his hand back and forth in a lazy motion. The firelight cast warmth over his already-tanned skin, illuminating his chest and causing her heart to seize as she tore her gaze away, back to his amber eyes, which were already watching her. He smirked, and she fought against the urge to hide her face behind her hands.

"What’s your favorite color?" Luella asked. Her hair fanned out above her as she lay on her back.

Az hummed, contemplative. He stared into her eyes before flicking his gaze down to rest on her warm cheeks, where she knew a blush was painting her skin. The demon gave her a lopsided grin before saying, "Pink."

Her face heated up even more if it were possible. She turned her attention to the ceiling, tracing the cracks along the walls that spider-webbed up, up, up and made strange little patterns—a morbid version of cloud gazing.

She asked the first thing that popped into her head to distract herself from further embarrassment. Something that had been pressing heavily upon her mind, and she had been far too nervous to ask. Even now, trepidation threatened to stop the words. What if she made him angry? But her curiosity won out, and she spoke. "Why are you here, Az?"

The demon grew still beside her, and she turned her head, peeking at him. The strong line of his jaw clenched with subtle displeasure, and she watched as he, too, directed his attention to the ceiling. An arm was crooked and tucked under his head, and the other fell, the fingers that had been tracing over the bars coming to rest on his lower stomach. His bare, lower stomach, she noted. Luella felt her skin warm anew. But this time, not with embarrassment.

He looked so…otherworldly; though, she guessed he *was*, as a demon from the Below. It was a whole other realm from the one in which she resided. He turned, eyes locking on her, and she tried not to feel abashed by the fact she had already been studying him intently.

"I…" Az trailed off like he was searching for words that were just out of his grasp, escaping him. "I went against the King."

"What do you mean?" Luella rolled over on her side, resting her cheek on her crooked arm. Even through the bars that separated them, she felt intimidated by him. Laying so close to him… Her fingers slipped through the bars, poking against his side. Az tensed at her touch before grabbing her hand quickly like he was scared she'd pull it away.

He tugged her hand as far as it would go, her arm socket straining as he threaded his fingers through hers and pulled their clasped hands up to his chest. She stifled a groan of protest at the stretch. She knew Az didn't realize he was hurting her; instinctively, she felt that if he knew, he would be ashamed of himself. Az would never hurt her. Couldn't hurt her.

Somewhere along the way, her apprehension of him had lessened and lessened. At first, it had been quelled by his binding blood oath. But now? Now, she could feel it in her bones, in that cavernous pit of her soul where she was bereft of any magic. Only one thing resided there, filling up those empty spaces: a call leading her to him, holding the knowledge that he would truly protect her.

When Az failed to respond, Luella didn't push him. She was well acquainted with the nature of secrets. She had her own. If the roles were reversed, and he asked her why she was imprisoned, she wasn't sure if she would be very forthcoming, either. So how could she expect the same of him?

"Enough of that." Luella wiggled her fingers in Az's grip. "What's your favorite food?"

Her stomach grumbled softly at the mere word.

At her change of topic—and the faint growl from her belly—Az barely concealed his amusement, head tilting back as his chest expanded and a laugh echoed in the space between them. A happy sound, unfitting in the darkness of the dungeons.

He rubbed a thumb down the back of her hand, and she preened at the fact she could elicit such a noise from him, chest warming with an emotion she didn't want to investigate in its entirety.

"Strawberries," Az said. Another secret smile was on his face, and Luella bit her lip, holding back a twin expression that threatened to split her mouth wide open. She hadn’t smiled in a while. It felt odd. Amber eyes focused on where her teeth dug into her lower lip, and he swallowed harshly. "And yours?" He cleared his throat.

She hummed under her breath, memory conjuring up savory rolls topped with fresh herbs and pats of melted butter, roasted nuts rolled in caramelized sugar, or even bowls of sweet cream topped with a dollop of honey and sticky syrup.

Her mouth watered, and she let out a low moan.

What she wouldn’t give for some real food.

Az sucked in a sharp breath.

"Anything sugary. I’ve always had a sweet tooth."

He hummed, considering her. "I think I do, too."

His tone was heavy, and she looked at him, feeling tension weigh between them as their eyes met. The deep timbre of his voice conveyed far more than a mere discussion of sweet treats. She couldn’t handle it—had never been so relentlessly pursued before.

Luella looked away first.

Az’s fingers continued their soft path against the back of her hand. Like he understood her hesitation somehow and did not fault her for it.

He tugged her hand to his face slowly, like he was giving her a chance to break away from his hold before he pressed his mouth against the fluttering pulse point on her wrist. His lips were soft, plush, and inviting. Luella’s breath hitched.

"Let’s go to sleep," Az murmured against her skin, his voice far deeper than she had ever heard it before.

Luella nodded, her voice stolen from her by the mere touch of his lips against her skin; she was left breathless, unable to formulate words.

She fell asleep like that. Hand clutched tightly in Az’s, held against his chest, with her arm stretched out between the slats of the iron bars.

Flames radiating warmth flickered in the fireplace before her. Embers sparked from the orange-hued, dancing blaze and landed against the stone

of the mantle.

Luella’s toes sunk into a plush rug, and she sighed. It was comfortable. Safe. Her body relaxed into the armchair, shoulders slumping in languid content.

Just as she felt like she might nod off, a presence settled against the back of the chair, hands landing heavily on the tall back. She startled, head tilting up to be met with the sight of red-tinged eyes, flecks of brown and hazel interspersed in a maze of maroon. Thick, black lashes lined the half-lidded gaze, and lips that were inviting and plush, sensual and graceful, curved up in a sinful smirk as her eyes tracked over his face before stopping right on that keen stare.

Bastian.

The vampire.

The interloper of dreams and the King’s captivating Advisor.

His treatment of her had been hot and cold, yet a strange sense of altruism, mellow as it may be, had been extended to her in seemingly random acts and platitudes.

A sash of silk to keep her hands tied and a promise to keep her life safe.

The vampire was an enigma.

And he had stolen into her dreams once more.

Luella glowered up at him.

"You." The word was a hiss between her teeth.

"Me," he purred in answer.

"Why did you steal into my mind this night?"

"Why is it you think I’m the one stealing into your mind? What if I’m only stealing *you* and whisking you away to mine?" the vampire countered.

"What difference does it make? You still go where you’re not permitted and take what does not belong to you." She was bold, careless. And she *loved* it.

Bastian stepped around to the front of the armchair, sitting on a low table resting in the center of the room. The fire was behind him, and the red glow illuminated his edges like an aura of fury and menace. His hands slapped against her knees—bare, she realized, for she was still in her tattered gown.

"I thought we covered this already, pet. You *do* belong to me. You are mine to take and do with whatever I see fit." Bastian distractedly toyed with the hem of her gown, the threadbare fabric torn and dirtied. He pinched it

between his fingers, lifting it from her thigh as though it gravely offended him. "Why am I not surprised? Of course, they haven’t thought to offer you a change of clothes. Those careless beasts," he muttered, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling as if in prayer for patience. "I can’t even leave them alone for a few days… Do I have to do everything myself?"

"What—" Luella started, but he cut her off with a firm finger pressed against her lips to shush her, and she grew cross-eyed as she looked down at the affronting appendage. She had half a mind to bite it.

"And this blood. You’re caked in it," the vampire huffed. "No matter. I didn’t realize how out of practice they were for caring for another. Let alone a fae princess,"—he eyed her with intent—"someone like *you*. I’ll see to it you’re taken care of from now on. At least while they have you in the dungeons." The last words were mumbled under his breath as he shook his head, and he flattened the hem of her gown back against her thigh and gave it a gentle pat.

The vampire was making no sense, and she wondered if he had hit his head or indulged in too much wine. Before she could ask just that, he pressed a firm thumb to her brow.

"Wait!" Luella lifted a hand to stop him, but it was too late.

She fell backward and forwards and upwards… All at once.

Body floating in a haze of scattered imagery.

And Luella—

Was jolted back into her body to the sound of muffled cursing.

"That blood-sucking bastard. I’ll fucking gut him." She heard Az hiss from behind her.

She had fallen asleep with her back pressed against the iron bars of the cell, the rigidness setting a slight ache to her spine. She twisted, facing Az.

"What?" Luella murmured sleepily. She pressed a hand to the back of her mouth to cover her yawn, a funny heat overtaking her as she kicked off the thin blanket draped over her slightly shaking, tired body. She felt hot and cold at the same time… Strange.

"Are you hurt?" Az fit a hand through the bars, rubbing every bit of her he could reach—her shoulder and the tip of her fingers when she offered her hand to him.

"Hurt?" she questioned. "Why would I be hurt?"

"Because of *him*," the demon seethed.

"Bastian?" she breathed.

Did Az know him?

"He stole into your dreams. I feel him all over you. Smell him all over you." Az pressed his forehead to the bars, horns knocking against them from the movement. He gazed down at her, amber eyes stark and jaw hard. "He didn’t hurt you?"

"No," Luella assured. She sat up, pulling her hand away from Az’s as she rubbed her palms down her arms to warm herself.

Was it just her, or had it grown even colder?

The demon eyed her skeptically, and she rushed to assure him further. "I promise. It’s not the first time he’s been in my mind." She tapped a finger against her temple. "But he’s strangely never hurt me. Quite the opposite, in fact. He says he wants to keep me alive." The last part was a whisper, like she doubted it, even though the vampire had followed through thus far.

Az seemed to ignore her, all of his focus on her…hands?

He suddenly jerked forward and forcibly lifted the delicate skin of her wrist to his mouth and ran his nose along the blue-green veins there. She softly exhaled at the feel of him pressing so insistently against her, following the line of her vein and puffing warm breaths against her cool skin.

"What are you—"

He looked up at her from under his lashes, a thick fan of black. She inwardly lamented the fact that a demon could have such pretty eyes and dark lashes.

"Need to get his scent off you." His voice was gruff.

After a few heavy moments, Az released her, a satisfied tilt to his lips. She was reluctant to pull her arm back but didn’t know why. Something about him carefully covering her in his scent made her weak in the knees. She was thankful she was already sitting. If he continued for any longer, she feared she may have turned into a puddle on the floor at the warmth filling her chest, filling that usually cavernous and empty space in her stomach.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, and opened her mouth to dispel the sudden terseness between them.

Just when a question was poised on her lips, she was interrupted by the howling call of a guard. "Food!" the male barked, shoving a little dish with the usual dried meat and white bread through the little slot at the bottom of the cell.

Luella scrambled to it, knees digging into the ground in her haste to pick the platter up. She was ravenous, her stomach an empty pit. She tore into the bread, barely paying attention as the soldier left. Az watched her with alertness.

"Hungry?" he asked, stretching a hand through the bars to offer Luella his bread. She nodded around a mouthful of the tasteless substance before crawling back to where their cells touched. She gave him a small smile and reached a hand out for the bread, but he jerked it back at the last second. "Ah, ah." Az smiled before tearing off a small piece and offering it to her. "Let me. Open," he instructed.

She obeyed, mouth opening just a tiny bit. Az touched the piece of bread to her mouth, forcing it further between her lips. She closed her lips around it, took it from him, and chewed thoughtfully. He lowered his hand to her chin as she swallowed, eyes sparking in pleasure.

"Good," Az mumbled.

Luella gulped, mouth suddenly dry, and she reached for the small tin of water, lifting it to her lips and swallowing greedily.

"Oh." Remembering the dried meat on her platter, she offered it to Az, and he took it with a grateful smile, tearing it into quickly.

Luella didn’t know what the feelings low in her belly meant. But she kept thinking of Az’s hand against her chin, directing her to swallow, his grumbly voice praising her.

She huffed, laying on her back, arms reaching far above her head as she stretched out her tired, achy body. Her back arched slightly from her stretching, and she watched as Az’s attention jerked down to rest on her chest, amber eyes darkening, before he tore his eyes back up to settle on her face.

Luella felt unsettled for some reason. In a quick motion, she rolled to her stomach, tucking her curled hands under her chin as Az stared down at her.

"Tired?" he asked.

She nodded, feeling a strange wave of vertigo overcome her. Her head felt spinny, and her body felt… untethered.

"Yeah," she mumbled, closing her eyes. "Think I’ll rest for a bit."

A warm hand came to settle on her forehead. "You’re burning up," Az remarked. He moved to press the back of his hand against her cheek, the coolness of his palm comforting to her. She let out a tired and contented

sigh. Normally, the demon had scorching hot skin, but it felt wonderful on her inflamed cheeks. Cool, almost, against her flushed and overheated skin. "Are you getting sick?" Worry clouded the demon’s voice.

Luella made a noncommittal sound under her breath.

Waving him off lazily, she curled up even smaller, a knee pulling up to her stomach as she attempted to sleep. She felt her gown ride up high on her leg, but she was beyond caring in her current state.

"Rest, angel. I’ll keep watch over you." Az sighed heavily, carding his fingers through her hair. "Those fuckers," he growled.

And she was out like a light, falling asleep to fingers stroking firmly through her hair and the sound of Az rumbling lullabies in that guttural, foreign language of his.

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13

CREAM (INDULGENCE)

Luella woke to a tremble in her fingers and a shiver on her skin.

Bleary, she opened her eyes, head pounding and body sore. Her nose felt stuffy.

Az had been right, she thought tiredly. *I am sick.*

Not surprising, with the conditions in the dungeons. The air was as frigid as standing on the high peak of a snow-tipped mountain, and the drip of water falling from the ceiling often soaked her to the bone as she slept. The ground was hard, and the food was old and stale and lacked the rich vitamins a fae needed—let alone someone as large and muscular as a demon.

The dungeons were crafted to kill slowly. A slow death, but an end, all the same.

Luella sat up, anchoring a hand on the frozen, hard ground below. White puffs of air wafted from her mouth as she breathed.

"Angel?"

She perked up slightly, looking to the cell beside hers to see Az already watching. His dark brow was lowered, shaggy brown hair tousled like he had been running his fingers through it, horns curving from his head menacingly.

Az dragged a hand down his face, haggard. "You’re awake."

She nodded dully, clearing her throat before speaking. "Did I sleep for long?"

"Longer than normal," Az remarked. "I've been…worried. About to rattle the bars to get those fuckers' attention to send a healer down here."

She hadn't heard him curse much. The first time had been when she had awoken from her dream with Bastian. Az must have truly been concerned.

"No." She rubbed her arms with her palms to warm herself up. She would live. Perhaps. "No need for that. Just a common sickness. Fae are weaker. I'm used to it. I fell ill often at…home," she trailed off.

Luella scooted forward, leaning against the bars, and Az fit a hand through seamlessly, grabbing her shoulder and gripping it tightly. His touch was a comfort. She sighed, head tipping back against the cold iron and eyes shuttering closed.

"I'm so t-thirsty," she mumbled while a sharp shiver wracked through her.

"They didn't bring anything while you were asleep, but it shouldn't be too long now. They better be thankful I'm locked up, or I'd kill them for leaving you like this. For allowing you to be treated like this."

She held his hand to her shoulder, rubbing her thumb against it. "Thank you for taking care of me, Az," she whispered.

"Always."

The guards still had not brought food.

Luella grew weary.

She rested the whole day—or night, she wasn't sure.

Just when she felt like giving up and falling asleep, even if she couldn't be certain she would awaken, she heard footsteps echo in the hall.

"Someone's coming!" She heard Az's harsh whisper.

Luella jerked up, desperation for sustenance clawing at her empty stomach and giving her a small zap of energy. The blanket fell off of her in her haste to hurry to the bars facing the shadowed halls. She gripped the bars fiercely, eyes straining in the darkness beyond to see who, or what, was coming.

"Back up, Lu," Az ordered her.

"No." She pouted. If she were a wolf, she imagined her tail would be wagging at the prospect of food being brought to her. Maybe that was the

King’s aim, to condition her to the sound of footsteps and turn her into a pliant prisoner.

The footsteps grew closer, and she grew angry at the sight that rounded the corner, emerging from the shadows like the skilled dream thief she knew him to be.

Bastian.

He was dressed differently than she had seen him before. More casual. The vampire wore a dark cloak, unclasped, and sturdy boots were on his feet. His pants were simple leather, and his shirt was a maroon cotton blend. His black hair was unbound, falling over his forehead and against his nape like silk. The top strands were a bit ruffled as though he had been in a rush. In one hand, he held a rather large basket.

"Glad to see me?" The vampire lifted the basket with a half-smirk, unlocking the door of Luella’s cell, entering and shutting it behind him just as quickly. He cast a curious glance at Az, an elegant brow arching. "And you, beast? Fancy seeing you here."

Az growled, hands rattling the bars of the cage, and he stretched a tanned arm through, fingers curling around thin air in his desperation to reach the vampire. "Stay away from her," he seethed.

"Oh, I don’t think that I will. I applaud you for your effort, though." Bastian looked to Az, then to where Luella was crouched on the ground. "Interesting."

Luella backed up, knees drawing to her chest as she moved closer to Az’s side of the cell.

"None of that, pet." Bastian tsked. "I told you I would take care of you, did I not? This is me fulfilling that promise. I’m sorry it took me so long to come to you. I was indisposed… But I will not let the King neglect you any longer, you have my word."

The vampire took to a knee, placing the basket on the ground before her and opening it. He gave her a wink as he pulled out a thick, fluffy pastry. A juicy strawberry rested on top of the custard icing, and the edges were browned and crisp. The middle looked slightly doughy, just as she liked it.

"For you," Bastian offered. "A strawberry tart with cream."

Az growled from beside her, angrily spitting out, "You’re not funny."

"Oh, I’m hilarious."

Luella was confused by their banter, but her grumbling stomach had other plans. Her mouth watered, and her focus was solely on the pastry held

in Bastian’s pale, slender hand.

But she did not reach for it, too afraid to be fooled by this creature. To fall prey to his trap.

He rolled his eyes, forcibly lifting one of her hands and placing the tart into her palm. Az growled in warning.

"I don’t bite. Unless you ask, of course." A white fang poked his plush lower lip.

She hesitantly lifted the edge of the tart to her mouth, but the strawberry threatened to topple off, so she plucked it off the top, the cream still stuck to the bottom. She lifted it to her lips and gave it a soft taste. Thick, decadent cream melted on her tongue. She moaned at the rush of sugar against her tastebuds.

"Gods," Bastian muttered. "How do you handle it?" He seemed to direct the question to Az, who merely shot the vampire a violent look.

She broke off the edge of the tart, crumbs sticking to her sticky, juice-coated fingers. Watching Bastian out of the corner of her eye, Luella offered the piece to Az through the bars.

"For me?" The demon quirked a thick, dark eyebrow, and she silently waited for him to take it from her.

Luella couldn’t stand him being hungry too; though, she knew the demon could withstand a lot more than she could. He could go without water and food for far longer, but sugary food was a weakness to many, and she wouldn’t indulge and fill her empty stomach while he watched on.

One of Az’s hands snaked up to quickly grip her wrist, and he lifted her tart-laden hand toward his mouth, tearing a bite off. He hummed in appreciation, eyes closed as he chewed. He kept her wrist tightly in his grasp. Warm puffs of air tickled over her fingertips from how close her hand was to his mouth, and her breath hitched.

Rustling in the background distracted her from Az’s lips closing around the last bite of the tart, and she turned, watching as Bastian lifted a jar of dark liquid from inside the basket. He uncorked the lid with a loud *pop*, lifting a small glass to decant it. Hand raising high above to allow the liquid to trickle into the glass, a steady stream of sweetly-smelling juice trickled into the glass. She felt a wave of thirst come over her again and tugged her arm from Az, walking on her knees closer to the vampire.

He lifted the glass of juice, eyes half-lidded and so charged with heat that her throat felt dry from more than just thirst. If it weren’t for the intense

need to wet her parched throat, she would feel embarrassed to be so… affected by this vampire. At least with the thirst, she had an excuse for why her mouth was dry, why her hands were clammy with nerves and thighs clenching as she sat, waiting for him to offer the glass to her.

Luella tried to take it from him, but he knocked her hands away, placing his free hand on her chin. The vampire tilted her head back. It made her vulnerable, and she struggled to swallow the saliva that pooled in her mouth from the position she was forced into.

Bastian tutted under his breath and lifted the glass to her lips. "Open up, pet." His voice rumbled, head lowering to be closer to her.

She shivered under the intensity laced in the words but obeyed, mouth parting, awaiting him. He tilted the glass, and cool, sweet juice slid into her mouth. It was pleasant, refreshing, and almost sickly sweet after her usual fare of water and stale bread. She tried to close her mouth against the overloading sweetness, but he wouldn’t allow it, tipping the rest of the glass back quickly. Luella had no choice but to swallow it all. The last trickle slid down the side of the glass, flowing into her awaiting mouth, and he released her then, giving her a quick once-over with a heated expression.

Juice dribbled from the corner of her mouth, and her tongue poked out to catch it. But she must not have caught it all. Bastian’s thumb quickly swiped it away, collecting the rest. The liquid beaded on his pale finger; the dark plum color was a sharp contrast against his pale-as-snow skin. He held her gaze as he lifted his thumb to his mouth and sucked the juice off.

Luella parted her lips slightly, shocked and… flushed. She quickly broke his gaze, unable to hold it for long. She didn’t know anything about these types of things. She felt in over her head and totally out of her element. Naive and mere prey.

Az was still watching her, white-knuckling the bars and wearing a volatile scowl. Luella was glad for the iron bars keeping them separated—couldn’t imagine the savagery that would be incited if they got their hands on each other. Tension was in the air, so thick it choked her.

"Thank you," she mumbled, breaking up the feverish mood that had descended upon them.

At her words, Bastian patted a hand against her bare knee before touching a finger to his temple. He closed his eyes in concentration.

It was a motion Luella had seen before, she realized. On the journey to Serpentis, Tharen and Graves had both done something similar. At the time,

she had thought they were communicating by way of a spell or enchantment, but now she realized they were linking thoughts with the help of Bastian. With his Mind magic, Bastian could persuade and steal into minds and also send and receive thoughts. It made for a quick means of communication, especially over long distances.

The vampire must be so powerful to keep up with it for so long… Considerable power, just like the amount flowing through Tharen’s veins. And Luella knew Graves was the same, though she was not sure of his magic and skill, it was a given, considering his close association with the King.

Dragons loved to hoard, and what better hoard than an inner circle with unimaginable power?

Bastian opened his eyes, and she noted the red in his gaze was more pronounced. Wariness settled over her.

"You look pale," Bastian commented, eyes tracking over her face. "Have you fallen ill?"

"W-what do you expect?" Luella couldn’t help but reply. "This place is uninhabitable… And fae aren’t as invulnerable as the rest."

She wondered if it was even possible, but Bastian wore an expression of *remorse* at her words.

Just when she felt some strange desire to comfort the vampire, faint footsteps and the soft swish of fabric marked the arrival of another.

Graves floated down the hall like a specter, emerging from the shadows. He blended in with the darkness almost too perfectly with his cloak and cowl.

He was covered like usual; Luella had only seen him uncovered just once, and she didn’t think she would ever forget the rugged allure hidden underneath. The scar marring his face did nothing to detract from his chilling looks. If anything, it made him more appealing. Dangerous, but in an attractive way, luring you in and scaring you away at the same time.

He opened the door of the cell quietly like the old iron bars were afraid of making too much noise and disturbing the aura of silence that followed the male. Even inanimate objects bent to his will.

Graves soundlessly sat a metal bucket on the stone ground. Water splashed over the top and landed on her ruined gown. It was cold, and she hissed through her teeth at the chill.

He leaned back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest as he watched her with those startling eyes.

Bastian dipped a finger into the water, swirling it around like he was testing the temperature. "Godsdamn you," he sighed. "Are you trying to make her even more sick? This is freezing." He lifted a dark cloth from his basket, flinging it at Graves. "Go get Tharen to fix your mistake."

The male rolled his eyes, a quick flash under his hood, and then he was gone, turning quickly and leaving the same way he came—silently.

Luella sat back on her haunches as she waited. Bastian grew quiet, and she suspected it was a rarity for the vampire from the way his tongue poked in his cheek every so often, sensual lips parting like he wished to speak, then promptly closing.

Through the bars, Az fiddled with the ends of her hair behind her, sullen and silent. If she didn't know any better, she'd assume the demon was jealous.

No, that was absurd, she thought, shaking her head.

Footsteps echoed in the darkened halls, and two figures emerged: Tharen, with Graves silently following. The Prima brought an air of lunacy wherever he went. *He wasn't quite there*, she remembered Graves warning her. She could see it in the way his jaw ticked in a constant state of anger, hands always fisting around nothing in overt rage. His icy eyes were empty like all the brightness of a normal blue had been leeched from them, along with every positive emotion, leaving nothing but the mere crystalline impression of the color.

The rigidness of the cell bars pressed against her spine as she moved back, closer to Az, and the demon settled a large hand on her shoulder with protective intent.

Tharen wordlessly bent down, hands cupping the sides of the pail of water. The metal grew red as he heated it with his palms, the top bubbling and popping under the temperature.

The mage met her eyes, jaw hard and unforgiving. The boiling water sizzled, and he removed his palms. Red handprints were left on the side of the bucket.

Settling back against the wall, Tharen rested with one leg outstretched and the other bent. Graves stood beside him, peering down his covered nose at her. She wilted under the force of their joint gazes, expressions of pure

hatred. Like *she* was the one in the wrong, even though *they* took her prisoner.

Bastian sighed, holding out both hands as Graves threw the cloth at him. The vampire dipped it in the water, ringing it out over the top to get rid of the excess. Dripping against the surface, it reminded her of the water that fell from the ceiling of her cell at night, an accompanying tune to the lullabies Az hummed.

Fatigue gripped her. She simply wanted to sleep.

"Turn around," Bastian instructed.

All traces of fight had long since left her, and she obeyed, turning to face Graves and Tharen as she gave Bastian her back. The chill made her nipples pebble, brushing against the thin scrap of her gown. She settled her arms over her chest, covering herself.

The cloth was warm as it dragged against the dirty skin of her nearly exposed back—the material was in tatters; it was a wonder to her it hadn’t fallen apart by now. Luella sighed, head falling forward and eyes fluttering shut. She had worried the temperature would be too hot, but it was perfect. Warm and soothing, making her far too pliant around the predators surrounding her. On the heels of a satisfied exhale, her shoulders slumped.

Bastian was quiet as he cleaned her, voice a sensual mumble as he instructed her to turn back to face him. Cloth-covered hands skimmed the skin revealed by the lines of her torn gown but never dipped beyond the hem. Tender motions as the cloth trailed along her arms, moving to her palms… Rubbing circles over her upper thighs, along the expanse of her bruised legs, and down to the soles of her feet. The rough pads of his fingertips bit into her calves as he turned her ankle, swiping the cloth against the top of her foot.

The lulling sound of water trickled into the bucket as he kept wringing out the cloth and rewetting it, making her even more lethargic.

It all passed far too quickly for her liking.

Luella sighed; she could drift off to sleep right here.

"All done," Bastian mumbled, resting the cloth over the edge of the pail. He cleared his throat as he settled a hand on her now clean chest. "Lean back. I’ll wash your hair."

He pressed her back, and the nape of her neck cut into the lip of the pail. A hand rested on the small of her back to keep her steady, and her chest rose

and fell with even, soft breaths, pushing against the fabric of her gown obscenely from how she was reclined.

"Close your eyes," Bastian muttered.

She did, not even thinking of how vulnerable this moment was. Wholly exposed to the scrutiny of these males. Even Az, with his blood vow to her, unsettled her at times with his heavy gazes and lingering touches. At this moment, in a haze of dripping water and soothing touches, murmured words of praise, and calming strokes against her skin, she was perfectly at ease.

A quiet pop made her flinch, but the hand on her back flexed, fingers digging into her spine, stilling her. Something wet and cold fell against her crown, and Bastian's lithe fingers massaged it into her hair. Lavender-scented soap filled her senses, mingling with the scents of the males around her, a heady combination that made her already weary bones even weaker.

A quiet moan fell from her lips at the feel of his fingernails against her scalp.

"Feel good, pet?" The grip tightened on her lower back, and she tilted her head further in invitation, her neck bared.

Luella refused to give him an answer. She would not let him have any more control over her. With his practiced touches and murmured words, she felt unable to stop herself from sinking into him. But she would not allow herself to be lulled into a sense of false security, merely revel in this quiet moment. A hoax. Before leaving him bereft. No matter how gentle his touches, the vampire was one of her captors, a perpetrator of her kingdom's ruin, and she would vow to never bend to his will.

No matter how tempting he appeared.

She blamed her subdued state on her illness, refusing to attribute it to his enticing aura and how her body seemed to respond to him—to *all* of them.

Warm water cascaded over her scalp, rinsing the remnants of soap and dirt away. He urged her to sit up, keeping a palm firmly on her waist. Gentle fingers carded through the strands of her wet hair, and he gathered the ends of it up, wringing it out over the bucket before smoothing out her damp, golden curls.

"There. Now for your clothes." He lifted a bundle of folded clothing from his basket and pressed it into her hands.

Before she could voice her concerns about undressing in front of them, Az spoke up for her.

"Fuck no," the demon growled. The iron bars rattled as he shook them in fury. "She’s not changing in front of you three."

"But it’s okay if she changes in front of you?" Graves grumbled. Luella had thought he had fallen asleep. He had been so quiet this whole time, and she couldn’t even see his eyes from where his head was tipped back against the wall.

"You want us to close our eyes?" Tharen scoffed. He made it sound like a joke, but she jumped on it, eager to change. She didn’t even care about disrobing in front of them, so desperate to remove her stained and dirtied gown and don something new, even if it was borrowed from one of her captors.

"That’s fine," Luella squeaked, taking the bundle of clothes from Bastian.

With the fog of illness clouding her sleepy brain, she forgot all about propriety.

Tharen appeared startled, and she had the feeling the mage wasn’t the type to be easily surprised. He brushed a braid back over his shoulder, gesturing with a hand. "Well, then, go right ahead, Princess." He placed a palm over his eyes, getting comfy against the wall.

"Keep them closed," Az demanded, and then pointed a finger at both Graves and Bastian.

Bastian rolled his eyes but complied. He did not place a hand over his eyes, but he did close them. She tried not to think about how easy it would be for him to open and look at her.

Maybe this hadn’t been the best option.

Graves did not move, and she held the bundle of clothes close to her chest, waiting for him to comply. Her damp hair stuck to her nape, and the fabric of her gown was wet from the water, clinging to her body. She might as well have been nude for how well it covered her.

"You have a small birthmark high on your right thigh," Graves started, and Luella nearly jumped out of her skin at the rough sound of his voice… "It’s not like I haven’t seen all of you before." His words left nothing to the imagination.

"What?" Luella breathed, bundling the stack of clothes closer to her chest like she might hide behind them.

How did he know that? When had he seen her nude?

She wracked her brain, trying to remember if perhaps she had been unconscious around him. All the while, her skin felt slimy with violation.

Graves's tone had allowed no space for rebuttal or counter. His words had been sure. She flushed.

Bastian red-tinged eyes popped open, and Tharen didn't even try to hide the amused expression on his face as he watched through the slitted fingers resting over his face.

Ever the protective beast, Az seethed, "*When*?"

"I was the first to see her. You'll never take that from me." Graves shrugged a broad shoulder as he spoke—all the answer he deigned to give. His words weren't directed to Luella but to the other three in the room, all wearing vastly different expressions.

Tharen with sadistic amusement; Az, open rage on her behalf; and Bastian, whose emotion was not so easily identifiable. The vampire's eyes were darkened red with interest, yet the downward tilt to the corners of his mouth spoke of discontent, coupled with the swift tapping of his finger against his thigh. In… fury? It was as though the vampire was trying to stop himself from going at Graves's throat.

Maroon eyes shifted to her, and Bastian's expression softened somehow. The anger lessened, and the interest burned hotter. He seemed pleased by the prospect of Graves seeing the entirety of her flesh.

But that couldn't be right, could it?

Why would he care?

She imagined vampires to be deeply territorial and possessive, not at all one to enjoy sharing.

"Think hard on it," Graves instructed her, before he returned to silence.

Tharen punched Graves's leg, but the male did not even make a sound at the harsh hit. Graves pulled the hood of his cloak down further, completely obscuring his eyes.

She decided to hurry before they changed their minds. She unfurled the bundle of clothes. Long pants, thick and soft, perfect for the frigid dungeons. A long-sleeved, woven shirt, laces crossing down the front; it was huge. Luella held up the shirt by the arms, and not even on her body, it swallowed her. It looked like a male's shirt. One of their shirts?

Az poked a hand through the bars. "Hurry up, angel. I'll make sure they don't look."

Luella nodded, distracted by the size of the shirt. Holding it to her nose, the fibers tickled her face as she breathed deeply. Bergamot. She sighed. The same smell that's been wafting off of Bastian and driving her near mad.

It was his shirt.

Peeking one last time at the three hulking figures in her cell, Luella stood, quickly and quietly. She drew closer to Az, uncaring that the demon didn't cover his eyes. She trusted him, and he had already seen much in the time they'd been in such close quarters together. She had awoken from sleep a few nights before, her gown completely bunched up around her waist from where she had fitfully tossed and turned, exposing the silken panties on her lower half.

She didn't bat an eye at the demon's watchful glare, much more concerned about the other three within the confines of her cell—so close she felt their warmth as it radiating around her.

She quickly pulled her gown off, glad to be rid of the dirty, torn thing. Cool air wafted over her exposed skin, and she shivered. Stood only in thin panties, an arm held over her breasts, she looked up. Az's amber eyes were already trained on her body, and he swallowed, throat moving at the motion. A vein pulsed in his neck, and she almost tripped in her haste to pull the shirt over her head one-handed. The shirt fell to her lower thighs, almost hitting her knees. The laces were undone, and the sharp V of the neckline dipped to almost her belly button, barely concealing her breasts.

In typical male fashion, Bastian didn't think to supply a fresh set of undergarments, so she would have to do without…

She took a moment to steel herself before rolling the scant, silken material clad around her hips down the expanse of her legs. She balled it up and tucked it beneath her old gown. Az gave a low groan from behind her, and she looked up, still bent slightly with her back partially to him. Her golden hair was drying slowly in the chilled dungeons, and it fell in wet curls around her shoulders, offering a curtain for her to hide behind as she watched the demon from the corner of her eye and rose, pulling the skintight pants up her legs. They molded to her skin but were slightly loose around her waist.

"I'm done," Luella breathed, feeling a little out of breath—the exertion from changing or the heaviness of the air. Maybe a combination of both. "You can look."

Bastian’s eyes slanted open, and they roved over her as he hummed low under his breath in appreciation. "Good," he rumbled. His sensual voice was deeper.

Tharen stood, slapping a hand on Graves’s shoulder as he passed. He barely even glanced at her before he left, calling out over his shoulder, "We should do that again sometime."

Luella bit back a scoff.

Graves followed suit, not even muttering a word as he left. But she felt his stare on the exposed skin of her chest, and the birthmark on her thigh burned as she remembered his words. His challenge to *think hard on it*.

The male was as silent as a whisper of air as he retreated into the shadows of the hall. The darkness welcomed him in its embrace like they were one and the same.

Red eyes still locked on her, Bastian stood. The shirt threatened to fall over her shoulder as she shifted. The vampire stepped closer, and Az gave a low growl in warning.

With an impish half-smirk, Bastian raised his hands, reaching for the laces on her shirt. His knuckles brushed over her chest, and she inhaled sharply. Pulling the end of the laces taut, he tied them off with practiced hands, smoothing over a few wrinkles in afterthought. His tense shoulders relaxed now that she was more decent.

"I’ll be back soon. I promise, pet. I won’t let you waste away here." He brushed a hand down her cheek and bent to lift the bucket. He left the basket, giving it, then her, a pointed look. Her stomach grumbled, even after eating the pastry he had brought.

The door to her cell creaked as he opened it, shutting it behind him firmly. The key turned in the lock, and Bastian retreated into the darkness, leaving her alone and trembling in the aftermath of her captors’ presence.

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14

FEVERED REVELATION

The raven was back, perched on one of the unlit scones that lined the hallway.

It was at that moment, Luella realized the raven was not a mere bird.

Piercing, deep blue eyes stared right at her.

Her brow furrowed as she sat up, and the plush blanket that Bastian had left for her fell to her waist.

No.

It couldn't possibly…

The eyes. Like lapis lazuli. Twin orbs of the most shining and pure, rich, deep blue—familiar to her. Mind snapped back to the memory of Graves's eyes evaluating her heavily through the thick, shadowed folds of his cloak.

A raven shifter?

The King's silent shadow was a *raven shifter*?

She scoffed.

Of course.

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she remembered him from the night that started it all. He was there, watching her, perched upon her windowsill as she disrobed. He had seen her in a way that no one had seen her before. He had been there like a warning of what was to come. If only she had known.

If only.

She tried to match the image of the shadowed figure Graves to the raven perched in front of her. The eyes were the same. Scarily so. Even down to the cool, contemplative, and detached look—it was just like Graves had stared at her, without a word and without real feelings showing… as if trying to figure out some puzzle.

And he had seen her nude.

Her face flushed at the violation that had happened without her knowledge.

The fae were pious and viewed innocence as something to be held in the highest regard. Though the dominium were known for their exploits with their maturity, the heirus were held to much higher standards. Must adhere to a strict set of rules to maintain their purity. These roles were even more heavily enforced for Luella as her parents wanted her to be *the* purest. The *most* sacred.

No one had ever seen her that way, and the moment had been robbed of her.

Anger rose within her. She couldn’t stop it.

"Hey," Luella whispered into the night, the sound of her voice bouncing off the walls. The cool air stole the word from her lips and carried it to the awaiting raven. Wings fluttered as she spoke. "*You*. I know it’s you." She let out a ragged breath in indignation.

The raven’s head cocked to the side. An eerie motion. Her skin tingled.

She stood in a daze, and she caught Az’s attention with her movements.

The demon turned his head to see what had entranced her.

"What the fuck," Az growled. Luella turned her head to him, startled at the pure look of anger marring his usually soft features. It put a fright in her bones to see such a sight. Her heart sped up, and Az must have sensed it, for he immediately tempered his rage. "No, no, angel. I’m not mad at you." He jerked his head. "I’m mad at *him*. For coming here. For thinking he can lay claim on you. Well," he called out. "She’s *mine*. You can’t have her. Not after how you’ve treated her."

A wave of emotion crested over her.

Her fists clenched. Impulsively, she bent to lift the small, empty tin that had held her water. Hand wrapping around the handle before she could talk herself out of it, she flung it.

The tin hit the bars with a loud clang, and the noise reverberated throughout the cell and into the hallway. A ringing echo that did nothing to

match the fury she felt.

The raven didn’t even budge. Stoic and still as a statue, the male she knew as Graves perched in his shifted form, the raven’s wings fluttering as clawed feet gripped the sconce. Those deep blue eyes never broke away from hers.

This sharp, stinging rage she felt… it was directed toward Graves.

But also toward herself. For not knowing. For not seeing the signs that had been so clearly laid out in front of her the whole time. Little breadcrumbs leading right to the plan simmering, ready to be put into motion. Her future, awaiting at the end. If only she followed the clues to see it all, know it all, discover it all.

She was angry, yes. Angry at him, at herself, at the King, and even angry at her parents for being so cruel.

Luella fell to her knees in realization, barely registering the thud as her bruised skin hit the ground.

Deception stung the worst of all.

She had no clue why this male’s lies hurt her soul so greatly when he had been nothing but indifferent and threatening to her.

But it *hurt*. She rubbed a hand over her chest, the yawning pit of nothingness in her soul weeping.

"Haven’t you hurt me enough? Leave." Luella’s voice cracked as the anger gave way to grief.

Anger and grief. Two extremes, often closely intertwined. One giving way to the other, the lines all blurry and distorted. She felt grief as she raged and rage as she grieved. The weight of it slammed against her and caused her chest to crack open and release all that pent-up emotion in a drowning wave—the bluest of melancholy lined with scarlet-tinted fury.

Her temple fell against the cool stone ground, and tears dripped from her eyes. She barely noticed Az calling out to her, soothing platitudes and kind reassurances as he did all he could trapped behind the bars.

And Graves did not falter in his watchfulness.

Luella didn’t feel too well.

After her somewhat cathartic crying session, she passed out, still knelt on the ground with her head lowered. She had awoken to Az pacing along the length of the bars separating them. She was barely awake long enough to drag herself to the bars and twine her hand with his before she fell back asleep.

Now awake, she felt far too nauseous to entertain the idea of attempting to rest.

Az curled a hand over her shoulder. "You need a healer. Even after eating what the *vampire*"—he spat, not even deigning to use Bastian's name —"brought you, you're not getting better. You're too warm." He scented the air, nose ghosting over the top of her head through the bars. "And you smell ill. Like crushed fruit."

Luella was not sure of the logistics of scenting amongst demons. She had never read anything about it in her books, but he kept smelling her, finding it vital to keep her covered in his scent, his nose pressing along her wrists or touching his own wrist to the skin of her neck.

The whole thing was confusing to her, and she didn't have the energy to understand.

Weakly, she pulled his arm further through the bars, as far as it would go, before she nestled underneath it, humming under her breath as she tried to get comfortable. She kept shifting, the rolling in her stomach, the stuffiness to her nose, and the scratchiness in her throat not allowing her to settle long enough to attempt to sleep.

However, she must have dozed off because the next time she opened her eyes, she was curled on the ground, her hand still held tightly in Az's as continuous shivers wracked through her. Her whole body trembled. She rubbed her cheek against Az's arm, bleary and nauseated, as she tried to soothe herself with his rich, melted cocoa scent.

A cool hand pressed to her forehead, and she rolled her head to the side, starting at the sight of Bastian kneeling beside her. The vampire looked haggard, frazzled. Worry painted his face with slashing edges and thick strips of shadow. His brow was downturned, as were the corners of his plush lips.

He spoke, but it sounded funny to her, like she was underwater. She could make out only a few words as she watched his mouth move, but the sound wouldn't travel to her ears, and she couldn't grasp the whole picture of what he was saying.

"*Healer…King…Medicine…Fever…*"

She was suddenly lifted, strong arms lodged under her knees. She fit her head in the crook of Bastian’s neck, inhaling bergamot and spice.

As Luella was taken away, a sudden wave of clarity hit her, and she reached out a hand, fingers weakly stretching out toward Az, who followed as far as the bars would allow, watching with bated breath as she was taken away from him.

The demon’s words carried to her on the frigid wind blowing throughout the dungeons. A soft and pleading: "I’ll come for you."

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15

HEALING ELIXERS AND BLUEBERRIES

Luella was gently placed on a leathery surface, a weary sigh falling from her chapped lips as she sunk into the softness.

After being removed from the chilled, dank dungeons, she felt slightly more lucid, but her throat was so dry, it felt like shards of glass were lodged in her throat, an insistent itching and scratching feeling that made her continuously swallow. A cough rattled her lungs.

The drone of voices made her crack an eyelid, and she saw Bastian retreating, but not before giving her a heavy, red-tinged glance.

"Where… am I?" she forced out the words, swallowing harshly around the dryness in her throat.

"You sound more awake now," Tharen remarked. His voice was low and throaty.

She shifted back against the chair, pressing herself deeper into it, like she may fall into the cushion and hide away from the mage.

Through half-lidded eyes, Luella took in her surroundings. She was in a dark workshop of some kind.

A large bookcase lined one of the walls. It was a bit messy and not organized well, with books stacked on top of each other; some tilted precariously, threatening to fall from the packed and weighted shelves. The rows of shelves dipped in the middle, a testament to how long they had stood there, holding such heavy contents. Papers and scrolls littered the many tables in the room, some with messy scrawl and others bare, waiting

to be filled with notes. No windows, save for one at the far corner, a thin and tall pane of tinted glass that let in a sliver of moonlight, slanting over the ground and illuminating the dark, wood flooring.

It was night.

Luella hadn’t seen the sky in what felt like an eternity.

Tharen was working at a long, wooden table full of an assortment of glasses and vials and a small, bubbling cauldron, fire licking at the bottom. The mage absently stirred the contents of the cauldron. Peering at her over his shoulder, he raked his eyes over where she was curled in the chair.

"I’m tasked with making you a tonic. Orders from the King." It was like he had to reassure her he wasn’t doing it of his own volition, lest she think him capable of even a modicum of kindness… He turned back around, pouring a strangely colored vial into the cauldron. The shifting liquid inside caught the light. Not quite any color. More like an amalgamation of them all.

She nodded, allowing her back and head to rest more comfortably against the chair. The back reclined, her feet stretched out in front of her, and it felt strange to be in such a vulnerable position.

Tharen snapped his fingers, and the fire under the cauldron extinguished. He lifted a metal tong, grasping a small vial with it, before carefully dipping it into the bowl of the cauldron. Steam curled from the sides and wafted up.

An appealing scent wafted from within the cauldron, and it made her limbs feel heavy.

He pulled the now full vial out. The little glass was full of swirling liquid, and bubbles clung to the side of it.

She kicked her legs against the chair, bare feet not even brushing the ground, and Tharen stepped closer, icy eyes charged with heat as he placed a large hand against her clothed knee. He parted her legs, stepping into the space between them.

With her sitting, the mage towered over her, and she had to crane her neck up, up to meet his gaze. The crystalline blue of his pupils pulled her in as she watched from half-lidded eyes. His jaw had a slight tick, even though the rest of his face was rather relaxed. The usually pinched features between his brow and around his mouth were smoothed out. The lines were gone, leaving smooth skin and a curious lilt. He was… striking. When not overcome by his usual sadistic air, that is.

He lifted the small vial in his hands. It was barely the size of his finger, filled with swirling blue liquid. It fizzed and popped over the lip of the vial, smelling faintly of the salty air of the coast and blueberries.

“Bottoms up.” Tharen lifted it to her lips, not giving her any time to think as he pinched her jaw, forcing her mouth to open, and tilted the vial upside down. The liquid filled her mouth, almost choking her, and she coughed around it as she swallowed roughly. It even tasted of blueberries and the ocean. The salty taste reminded her of when she would swim in the bay and accidentally swallow too much water, overpowering and bitter. He swiped a finger along the corner of her mouth and pressed it against her tongue. “Every last drop,” he mumbled.

Shaking from his touch, she closed her mouth around his finger instinctively. Her tongue pressed against it, and Tharen shuttered his eyes for a brief moment before pulling away from her. He turned briskly, and she watched his broad back as he placed the empty vial down on the work table.

It was quiet for some time, and the ticking of the clock in the corner grated against her nerves. The corded muscles in his arms flexed, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing beautiful, tanned skin enterlaced with a few pale scars. He lifted another empty flask, this one slightly bigger with a thin neck and wide bottom, and fixed it under a funnel. Carefully, he poured a large bowl of thick, red sludge into the mouth of the funnel. The viscous liquid hissed as it decanted into the flask.

Luella watched him work, lulled into a precarious peace from the clink of the glass bottles and tinkling of the metal tools as he worked. The warmth of the room and whatever the mage gave her worked to ameliorate the lighter parts of her illness, settling the stuffiness of her nose and the ache in her bones. Her lids grew heavy, and she slumped further into the chair, the leather creaking under her.

A white braid fell over Tharen’s cheek as he turned, his pale brows raising. Caught off guard like he was, he seemed less threatening; the shadows under his cheekbones were less pronounced, and the harsh line of his jaw wasn’t as sharp—coupled with the effects of the potion running through her veins, she felt completely at ease.

“You’re still here.” It wasn’t a question, more of a soft revelation. As though, in his state of intense concentration, he had forgotten all about her.

Somnolent, Luella gave a soft, barely there nod. Tharen cursed under his breath, placing a hand on each of her cheeks, righting her head from

where it was tucked against her shoulder.

He tugged on one of her lids, lifting it to inspect her pupil. She hadn’t even realized she had closed her eyes.

“Fuck!" he swore, and she batted his hand away.

“Curse too much…” Luella mumbled.

She cracked her eyes open. Was it just her, or was the room spinning?

She suddenly couldn’t remember why she had reservations about this male. He was so… pretty. His face was angular, and the pointed tips of his ears poked through his white braids; he smelled like winter, yet his skin was tanned like summer. All harsh lines and sharp angles.

Wide-eyed, Luella moved her face closer to his, her nose bumping his cheek.

“You smell nice,” she whispered against his skin, inhaling his scent of crisp snow. It burned slightly as she breathed in, like standing amid a snowstorm and feeling flurries whip around, a chill stinging against her cheeks.

He forced her back, a hand pressed firmly against her chest and keeping her far out of reach from him.

“Ah, godsdammit,” Tharen spat, lodging an arm around her thighs and another one behind her back as he cradled her to his chest. “At least you won’t remember this later… I hope. Maybe I should just drop you. It might knock some sanity back into that little head of yours.”

She hummed against his chest, nosing against the warm skin of his neck. She didn’t care what he did to her at this point, so long as he kept speaking in that quiet grumble of his. It vibrated against her cheek and carried throughout her whole body.

Time passed quickly and slowly, all at once, as she felt the ground move around her, Tharen’s arms shifting as he walked.

All too soon, he dropped her unceremoniously onto a plush bed. She bounced, letting an indignant, “Oof!”

Her head tilted against soft pillows. The ceiling was spinning, little flicks of starlight intermingling with the beveled edges that lined the walls.

My head hurts. Luella groaned at the thought.

“It should subside soon,” Tharen assured from beside her.

Had she said that aloud?

And when had the mage sat down next to her? Everything was messed up.

“W-what did… you do to me?” she slurred, closing her eyes again to stop the spinning room from making her sick.

It felt like only a second had passed, but when Tharen didn’t answer, Luella lifted her head to look at him and found the room completely empty.

Lodging a hand under her against a plush pillow, she sat up in a daze. Her head felt slightly better. But where there had been a cloud of fog around her senses, everything seemed to have snapped back to startling detail, exacerbated by the pounding in her skull. She dropped her head into her hands, letting out a low groan.

She cracked an eye, looking at her surroundings. It was a grand room. A fluttering, white canopy encased the bed she was laid upon—a white, wooden headboard and a footboard with a lacy eyelet comforter draped over it, tucked carefully into the corner. What must have been a dozen pillows covered the bed, scattered around in varying shapes, sizes, and colors. Little burgundy circles. Squares, hues of purple and gold, and cotton and silks. And even a dark grey, fluffy pillow that was long enough she could wrap her whole body around it.

Two double doors made entirely of glass were at the far side of the room, opening to a balcony. Fluttering, white drapes concealed the view, and she stood, padding over unsteadily to pull them back. Her breath was stolen from her at the sight. The balcony was rather small for such a grand castle, but the view was truly magnificent. The sun was low in the sky, oranges and purples mingling underneath the dim of the oncoming night. A few puffy, white clouds were on the horizon, fading into the backdrop of the many mountains in the distance. A sharp dip of the rocky cliffside led toward the shore, a bustling hub of the village and the many docks that lined the furthest side in the distance, while the drop right below the balcony would lead to the roaring ocean waves.

From the vantage point on top of the cliff, the castle offered a grand and far-reaching view of Serpentis. Luella could only see beauty as far as her eyes would allow. She wondered why Serpentis had such a terrible reputation. For such a beautiful place to be home to such cruelty, she couldn’t fathom it. She was loathe to admit, but Serpentis was far more appealing than Solis.

A ripple of sea breeze rattled against the glass door. She had the sudden desire to feel the air against her skin. Feel the dwindling daylight on her

face… and the cool brush of the moon. She tried the handles, only to find them stuck.

Luella scoffed.

Don't tell me they locked me in here, she thought.

One more firm rattle. It was well and truly locked.

She swallowed the curse that threatened to spill over. A rarity for her kind. Cursing was sacrilege. She refused to give in to her anger for the likes of *them*. Her captors—and the King.

She wondered where they were…

The last thing Luella recalled was the chill of the dungeon, Az's hands gripping hers, then… Nothing—

Her mind blanked out.

Luella inspected the rest of the room, taking note of the small vanity tucked in the corner. There was a collection of hair ornaments, little vials of perfumes and oils, and a beautiful jewel-encrusted silver hairbrush. Her fingers skimmed over the items. The vanity boasted a gilded mirror, but Luella pointedly ignored it. She didn't want to look at herself, scared to see the face staring back at her. She had changed too much. Everything had.

Would her appearance reflect those changes? Or would she still be the same, simple heirus?

Both thoughts were unsettling to her.

She opened the dark oak wardrobe, and inside were various gowns of color and style. Stacked on the bottom shelf were lacy garments and all sorts of silken things. With hesitancy, she picked one up, holding it by a tiny sleeve—a thin nightgown, the bodice made of entirely see-through silk mesh, which rippled out and grew more opaque toward the bottom.

Did the King expect her to wear… *this*?

The fae did not wear such openly sensual clothing, even in the privacy of the bed chamber.

She flushed, dropping the garment back into the wardrobe.

As Luella flipped through more gowns and pieces of lingerie—each making the pink on her cheeks darker and darker—she realized this could not have been quarters for a mere guest. Too many personal items were in here. Clothes fit for a queen, and a vanity littered with priceless baubles and jewels… A bed big enough for more than two.

So that begged the question: whose room was she in?

In the room, there were two doors, one smaller than the other. She tried the handle on one, finding it locked, just as the balcony doors were. It must have been the door leading out of the room, then. The other door handle gave way easily under her touch, opening to an expansive bathing chamber. The floors were white marble, stretching up the walls and crawling over the ceilings. Golden sconces lined the walls, flickering with a dark purple flame—enchanted to burn in such a color—it set the mood as sensual and inviting. An incense stick burned on a little metal cart resting near the large tub. Dark, heady smoke wafted up in tendrils and permeated the air with notes of vanilla and jasmine.

The tub was the centerpiece of the room—large, circular, and carved down into the floor. Like a pool, almost. Water already filled it, and she could make out a few steps leading down into it through the blue ripples on the surface.

A large mirror stretched along the far wall, nearly taking up the whole side of the room, and before she could register what she was doing, she met her reflection's gaze in it, seeing herself, frazzled, with eyes too large and golden hair tousled from her uneasy rest. Her cheeks were bright, flushed with fleeting sickness and the vestiges of embarrassment from the silky lingerie she had seen in the wardrobe. Yet the rest of her was far too pale. Cheekbones slightly sunken in from the weight she had lost, and there was a faint smudge of dried blood high on her neck and a few droplets on her collarbones—Bastian must have missed that spot when he had cleaned her in the dungeons. Her borrowed shirt hung precariously off of one shoulder and fell to her lower thighs. The pants she wore were too tight along her hips but bunched up around her ankles, ill-fitting.

She didn't recognize herself. Didn't recognize the being who stared back at her. She was so used to seeing herself pampered and perfectly sculpted. To see herself so harrowed was like looking at a wholly different person.

Swallowing roughly, she turned away. She couldn't stand to look at herself anymore.

Luella was used to looking in the mirror and feeling like the image that stared back at her wasn't herself, but now, more than ever, she felt detached from her body. It was all disjointed, and everything was out of place, most of all her.

A sudden wave of exhaustion made her exit the bathing chamber and head toward the bed, steps stumbling with weakness. She parted the edges of the canopy and knee-walked to the very middle. She hadn’t focussed on it before, but it was truly a big bed. Bigger, even, than the one she had at home. Fit for someone far more important than she.

With a sigh, she sank into the plushness as she laid down, pulling one of the blankets free from where it was tucked into the corner and rolled herself up like a cocoon.

Hands tucked under her chin and knees pulled to her chest, Luella vowed to only rest her eyes for a moment. Only enough to dispel the lingering drowsiness that clouded her mind and made her head a bit fuzzy.

She licked her lips, tasting faintly of blueberries and salt.

Strange…

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16

TIRED LITTLE LAMB

"Up!" A blanket was tugged away from her, and Luella started, eyes popping open as memories rushed back to her.

Dungeons, blood, death, fire—

Warm hands gripping hers through cold iron…

Az.

The King.

Luella’s hands shook as she grabbed the corner of the blanket, attempting to wrap herself back up in protection.

But it was roughly pulled away from her, and the canopy around the bed was pulled back, revealing the opulence of her cage.

Her head was still throbbing, but it was less than the pounding of earlier. Two maids stood by the foot of her bed; one was holding the blanket in her grip, hand on her hip as she angrily waved for Luella to rise.

"You’ve rested long enough," the maid said, her voice rough and curt. With a firm hand, she pulled the blanket off of the bed.

"Wait… stop," Luella weakly protested, sitting up against the headboard.

The maid could not have been older than Luella herself, but she spoke like she was seasoned; though, not in a good way. She had a shock of red hair, and her brow was drawn low over her strong features. Eyes, green with slit pupils and slanted at the corners. The other maid was shorter, with a

frame more lithe, but still taller than Luella. Her hair was cut in a bob around her chin, a mousy brown shade. She had glittering, bronze scales delicately inlaid into the skin of her cheekbones, her green eyes heavy with perpetual sorrow. From a distance, the scales looked like a fine cosmetic powder and not the telltale mark of a serpent shifter that it actually was.

The red-haired maid wrapped a rather strong hand around Luella's wrist, and she jerked back, scared, but the maid merely rolled her green eyes before pulling Luella out of the bed. She wobbled, feeling her heart pound from the sudden movement of standing up too quickly and the unfamiliar faces around her. She didn't even have time to gather her wits before she was steered into the bathing chamber.

Fear and confusion robbed Luella of speech, and she stumbled, shoulders quaking.

Would they hurt her? What did they want?

But as the maids went about preparing a bath—the shorter gathered a towel, while the taller, red-haired maid filled the pool with sweet-smelling salts and lined up a small collection of bottles beside it—stark fear left her, replaced by quiet apprehension.

"Did… Did the King send you here?" Luella managed. The red-haired maid shot Luella a look, not deigning to answer, so Luella met the saddened, green eyes of the other female, her short, brown hair swishing around her cheeks as she lowered her chin, not looking Luella in the eye.

Luella bit her lip, gasping slightly when the taller of the pair reached for her elbow, tugging her to stand by the pool of water. The female's red hair was like fire, and her jaw was strong, lips cut downward with a sharp scowl.

"Don't speak, heirus, or I'll burn you to ash where you stand," the red-haired maid hissed, thick tendrils of smoke wafting from her nostrils as she huffed. "We're to prepare you." Her harsh tone brooked no argument, and Luella cast her eyes to the tub of water.

Prepare me for what? She wanted to ask, but she knew she would find no help from the females.

A warm hand touched against her wrist, and the memory of Az's hands gripping hers made her throat close up.

A litany of thoughts swirled through her mind like the shifting water of the tub. A tempest of feeling, threatening to drown her.

And in the midst of those thoughts, faint images of Tharen, his broad back to her as she watched his muscle arms move. Bubbles in a cauldron,

thick liquid, and sweet smells. Warmth against her thighs and fingers on her lips. The memories filtered in slowly, but there were still a few gaps.

Luella remembered Tharen, the sickness that had made her limbs heavy, her tongue thick; remembered the mage giving her a potion, but not much else after that.

"Strip." The red-haired female tugged at the sleeve of Luella’s too-big, borrowed shirt, and she was far too consumed by the demon in her mind to protest.

They quickly disrobed her; Luella was used to baring her body to her personal maids at home, but these two were foreign to her, and she felt herself become shy under their forceful and harsh treatments.

Harsh green eyes cut to her. "Step in," the maid curtly ordered. The one with the scales on her cheeks had yet to speak, merely directing Luella with a wave of a hand or terse gesture as she shadowed the red-haired maid.

The servants here were far more different than the ones at Solis. They didn’t scurry and tiptoe around her like they were scared of her. They didn’t treat her with quiet reverence or give her hesitant touches that bordered on fear as they brushed through her hair and applied scented oils to her freshly bathed skin.

No, not at all.

These servants treated her like filth. They swept into the room with scathing glares and angry stomps—like they were upset at even having to share air with her—before roughly grabbing her and directing her like she was a mere doll.

Their entire demeanor was virulent. And Luella shrunk under the intensity of it.

She felt herself cower back, shoulders shrinking and eyes lowering as she once more donned the persona of an obedient heirus, pliantly bending to the wills of all those around her as she made herself smaller, all to let others become larger. To let them stretch their arms and inhabit the space she freed with resentment.

Luella followed their instructions easily. All while feeling a strange spark of anger ignite within her. She tamped it down.

Fury would be of no help to her now. She was far past vengeance.

They bathed her quickly, like they wanted to get it over with as fast as possible.

Her hair was tugged, soaps massaged into her scalp. She tried not to remember how Bastian had gently carded his elegant fingers throughout her hair, so different from the gruff way these maids treated her. Her skin was scrubbed red and raw with some abrasive cloth and charcoal soap. And they vigorously applied oils to almost every bit of her exposed skin above the water. Luella didn't have time to revel in the freshness of the soap that helped reveal the dirtied feeling that clung to her or the water between her toes that washed away all the purities and horrors she had faced. She didn't have time to luxuriate in any of it.

Luella gasped a breath as the silent maid poured a bucket of ice water over her head, washing away all the soap from her body. Shaking at the stark chill, her skin tingled at the difference of the water on her upper body where it was raised out of the bath, compared to the warmth of the water below. The dichotomy was tantalizing, but she didn't stop shivering, even when she was ordered to stand from the bath, wet hair dripping rivulets of water on her bare breasts, down the expanse of her stomach and over her hips, between her thighs. She tucked an arm over her chest and crossed her legs, trying to conceal herself. The maids didn't seem to be bothered by her nudity. It was part of their job, after all.

Green eyes raked over her with disgust, and she shrank back.

Luella couldn't help but feel like an exhibit of some kind. Put on display for the two shifters to gawk at.

They didn't even bother to offer her a towel or robe to cover herself with, merely shoved her into a chair in front of the vanity she had seen earlier, her bare backside against the cool seat, before they combed through her hair and rubbed oils over the rest of her body, in the places they couldn't get while she was seated in the bath. The movements were rough as they massaged against her upper legs and over her stomach. Thankfully, they skipped the junction of her thighs, hands ghosting along as they jumped from her hips to her thighs.

Luella was grateful.

She crossed her legs once more and watched in the mirror as the red-haired maid opened a vial of some kind, the top adorned with a little bulb, and attached was a small, gilded nozzle, which the maid pumped as the spray misted over Luella. It smelled sweet, faintly of ripened fruit with notes of vanilla.

Her golden hair was still damp. The coolness of the room did nothing to aid in drying it. The ends were frizzed slightly, but the top was still wet, and a strand stuck to her cheek. The maid with the scales along her cheekbones suddenly waved a dainty hand, small, flickering flames of dragon fire sparking to life in her palm. She lifted the hairbrush atop the vanity and waved the flame below the bristles, heating it, then brushed through Luella’s hair, tugging and pulling as it snagged on a few damp knots. The heat dried her hair quickly and tamed the usually frizzy curls into something silken and soft.

Perfectly styled and sleek, Luella’s golden hair fell in waves over her bare shoulders. The sides were slightly shorter than the rest, framing her face and accentuating her soft cheekbones. The maid twirled one of the strands around the brush, bouncing the end of the curl in her hand to make sure it was set before setting the brush down and lifting a pot of rouge.

She painted Luella’s lips, brushing a small bit of red tint along her cupid’s bow, accentuating the dip.

"Not too much," the other maid said from where she was crouched, wiping up a bit of water from the floor. "The King wanted her to keep her natural beauty. You know the fae," she scoffed. "They never do need much to keep themselves perfect and pretty." She stood, walking over to tug on a loose curl that fell against Luella’s shoulder, her lips etched into a scowl. "Makes me ill to think that all this beauty is wasted on such a naive, heirus bitch."

Luella met her green eyes, heart pounding at the fury held within the female’s stare, and her shoulders shrank inward as the maid set the curl back down, fingers skimming along Luella’s collarbone. The other did not respond, merely continued painting Luella’s face; she had moved to Luella’s cheeks, blotting a soft pink onto her already flushed skin.

After applying a soft smudge of kohl along her lashline, the female set her tools down, firmly nudging Luella to stand.

She was led to the wardrobe, and she watched the scales glitter on the cheeks of the shorter female as she gingerly plucked one of the dresses from within. The maids quickly dressed her, pulling a thin pair of silken panties up her legs to cover her. They left her chest free of coverings, and Luella felt exposed as they fastened the skirt around her hips and pulled the bodice up over her chest, tugging roughly on the laces of the corset before tying them off and tucking them out of sight.

Luella was quickly made to understand why she bore no brassiere when she saw the dress in its full glory.

A shimmering, silvery color. The bodice was intricately lined with webbing that crisscrossed and made maze-like patterns before dispersing into a simple skirt of blue ripples. It was shoulderless, held up by two thin straps that crossed over her arms. Long, fluttering pieces of fabric were attached to the upper arms to offer coverage, but with the barest of movements, it would flow to the side and create an illusion of what almost appeared to be wings. Two chains interlocked over the chest, connected by the straps over the arms.

It was… breathtaking.

Luella reached down and ran a shaking hand over the soft material of the bodice, fingers skimming over the slight bumps of the webbing inlaid into the corset. It perfectly supported her breasts and even pushed them up slightly; the chains fell across her chest and dipped as they rested over the swell there. The light, silver-blue color of the gown offset her skin, and one of the maids lifted a shimmering powder before brushing it over Luella’s chest, drawing attention to her collarbones with a faint glimmer that caught the light and made her skin look like it was glistening with sweat or droplets of water.

It was far more a revealing ensemble than anything Luella would have dared to wear in Solis. Her parents might have killed her if they saw her in such a thing. The fae paid attention to propriety, and as an heirus, Luella had to keep herself covered. Always doing the most to keep herself a secret, her skin made only for her future betrothed.

The red-haired maid spun Luella by her shoulders, being careful not to disrupt the gown. "All done." She brushed an invisible piece of dust from Luella’s shoulder, hardened eyes tracking over the dress clinging to her frame. "This will greatly please the King. Take care not to rumple the dress or sully yourself. The King would not be happy if you arrived for dinner in a less-than-perfect condition. Someone will be coming for you shortly." Her red hair fell over a broad shoulder as she gave a satisfactory nod and left, ushering the other maid out of the room with a crook of a finger.

The door quickly closed behind the females, and Luella heard the faint click of a lock after it shut.

She sighed, caged once more.

~

Luella eyed the bed, tempted to rest her weary bones and sleep. No matter that the maid had warned she was to be dining with the King tonight… Her fingers toyed with the fabric draped over her arms, contemplative.

She hadn't realized, but the sick feeling whirring in her gut had been assuaged. Whether it could be attributed to the aromatic oils she had inhaled in the bathing chambers or the potion Tharen had forced her to take, she was unsure.

After what seemed like an hour of pacing and thinking and being tempted to fall into bed and try for a dreamless sleep, there was a knock on the door. It was less of an entreaty for entry and more of a swift demand to be let in, unable to be refused. A key grated against the handle as it was unlocked, and the doors were pushed open, bringing in a whirl of an inviting, familiar scent.

Bergamot—spiced and lush.

Her mouth watered.

Luella smelled him before she saw him.

Bastian stepped into the room, dressed impeccably, much better than he had been the last time she had seen him.

The vampire wore fitted black pants and a matching black shirt, a red cape thrown over his shoulders and held together with a clasp made of glittering rubies. The collar was high, accentuating the pale skin of his neck. It dipped sharply, showing off the unblemished skin of his chest. Golden accents were woven into the shoulders of his cape, swirling lines that almost resembled the ones on the bodice of her corset. His reddened eyes were lined with dark kohl, half-lidded and sensual.

Bedroom eyes, fit for the room they were in. The bed beckoned, and she was acutely aware of it, thankful for the rouge on her cheeks, concealing her natural blush at the path her thoughts had taken.

Bastian's eyes raked over Luella, taking in the dip of her waist and the slight flare of her hips, made more pronounced by the corset tightly constricting her and forcing her posture upright and prim, just as a princess should be. The red in his eyes grew darker as his attention settled on her chest, following the chain resting over the swell of her breasts and tracking over where the delicate chains linked to the fabric draped over her shoulders. And further down, they trailed. Following the lines of her bodice

like he wanted to imprint the image into his brain, before floating over the way the breezy fabric of her skirt fluttered along her legs. Finally, coming to a stop where her bare toes peeked out from the hem of the silvery blue dress.

He scoffed. A light, teasing sound.

"The maids didn’t think to give you shoes?" Bastian’s voice was a low rumble in the room, and Luella swallowed from the sound of it. The vampire always sounded so sensual. She wondered if he even tried or if it was natural to him. Somehow, Luella was certain his sensuality was as part of him as her nativity was to her.

He would relish in her corruption.

Why didn’t that scare her?

Luella hurriedly shifted the hem of the dress to cover her feet. "N-no," she replied. Bastian smirked at her futile attempt to cover her toes.

She was wary of being in a room alone with him. The only time she had been truly alone with the vampire had been in her dreams, but she was unsure if he was capable of hurting her there. In this room, with her flesh as real as the dawning light of the sun, he could easily overpower her without a second thought, and she would be left to his mercy and every wicked whim.

"Well, no matter, then. So long as the King doesn’t look down." Bastian’s eyes dipped below her chin, where her bare collarbone beckoned, and his words halted. She took a deep, steadying breath, her chest swelling in invitation, flesh straining against the neckline of the gown. "Too far down, that is. And you’ll be just fine." He held out an elbow, waiting for her to take it.

She moved closer, nerves frayed and jittery, as she placed her hand onto the crook of his elbow, taking care to keep her distance otherwise.

"That won’t do," Bastian sighed, pulling her closer with a jerk of his arm. She fell into him, flush against him. The fabric over her arms fluttered to the side and allowed her bare skin to press against his clothed body. One of his hands gently came up to keep her own hand clasped to his arm, fingers ghosting over the expanse of her wrist before settling on her fingertips. He held her tightly. Like she may very well slip away if he dared to let go.

Bastian led her from the room, all the while, he kept her closely tucked into him. She tried not to breathe in that addicting scent, but it was hard.

The rich notes of bergamot were even more pronounced from this close to him, and Luella had the impulse to keep breathing deeply. Her nose itched with the atavistic desire to press it into the folds of his shirt and allow the scent to coat her completely.

Bastian did not seem to share the struggle, and he kept quiet most of the way while she fought those urges that welled up within her like that of some foreign beast or feral shifter that was in tune with baser instincts.

Never before had she felt such an urge, but to suddenly feel it for more than one male…

They walked down a grand hall that was lined with strips of golden carpet laid atop white, pure marble. Little alcoves broke up the walls, leading to small sitting areas or window seats nestled between tall, marble pillars, overlooking the view outside the arched glass windows. Other hallways branched off occasionally, vast and seemingly endless as they stretched toward other wings of the castle.

It was huge. Grand and glorious.

One of the windows they passed was slightly open, causing the tapestry laid on one of the far walls to flutter in the breeze, bringing with it a scent of sea salt and chilled air. It was a peculiar combination. The sea salt was slightly warm and briny, reminding her of summertime, yet the brisk bite to the air was different than the one of her home—more unforgiving and cold from the higher altitude.

They trailed down the grand staircase, and at the bottom, Bastian steered her toward the right, opening up two double doors set at the end of the hallway, leading right to the inside of a grand dining hall.

Tapestries lined the walls, with windows encompassing every other space. It was a big and bright room filled with golden light from the dimming sun.

Suddenly, Luella wondered what day it was.

How long had it been since she was taken from the dungeons? How long had it been since she was taken from her home?

A wave of guilt washed over her as her mind drifted to Az. Since she had awoken, Luella had barely thought of him, so consumed with her survival. Her heart clenched, and she gripped Bastian’s arm tighter to stop herself from stumbling under the weight of sadness.

He was all alone down there, in the cold darkness of the dungeons. Tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over and give her inner turmoil

away. She blinked furiously, watching her bare feet make their way over the cool marble of the floors, before coming to a stop in front of a high-backed chair. When she felt the threat of tears had abated, only then did she look up.

Luella was met with a sight that completely expelled any lingering traces of sadness from her mind.

Only fear was left.

And the tiniest dose of anger.

King Vale sat before her at the head of the long table in a chair that looked almost similar to his throne but on a smaller scale. He sat with the posture of a ruler, regarding her with green eyes and hair that was shining gold. With a wave of his hand, the King gestured for her to sit. Bastian pulled out her chair, nudging her down with a hand on her shoulder before he took the seat to her left.

She was at the King’s right, and it was not lost on her that she was seated in a spot of high prestige. Tharen sat directly in front of her on the King’s left, with Graves to his right.

She jolted as she met Graves’s lapis lazuli eyes. The male’s face was uncovered this time, and it was only the second time she had seen him so. Wearing a black cape that draped over his shoulders, along with a black metal chest piece that fit over the top, he looked the part of a regal knight, instead of a shadow that worked in the dark of night. The scar that cut into his face gave him an edge, but not enough to be brutal, merely enough to add mystery, playing into that enigmatic air that followed him wherever he went. Luella shivered, taking note of the many pale scars that lined his tanned skin.

Graves evaluated her cooly, just as she knew him to do—a purveyor of her suffering, a harbinger of bad omens, and a voyeur of the most detached intent. He easily broke away from her stare, and she tried not to feel offended as she watched him rub a hand over the stubble on his jaw. Tharen raised a brow at her, cruel and sadistic, his cold eyes never leaving her face, even when she was the first to look away under the intensity of them. She knew she held his attention, could feel unfettered interest burning against the skin of her rouged cheeks.

"Welcome, Princess Luella," King Vale intoned. He waved a hand to the feast splayed on the table before them. "Eat. You must be hungry."

For the first time, Luella tore her attention from the males around her, resting it on the food laid on the top of the dining table.

Fruits and pastries decorated the platters of a tiered tower. Roasted duck and lamb, basted in brown juice marinade and covered with sprigs of herbs and sour lemon, the centerpiece of the table. A carving knife was already wedged into the baked side of the lamb, waiting to be sawed into the seared meat. Platters of garden vegetables and trays of nuts and cheeses littered the gilded runner down the center of the table, tiny forks stacked up by their sides to be used to spear into them.

Bastian ignored it all, lifting a golden pitcher and pouring red, thick liquid into a wine glass. He swirled it absentmindedly before lifting it to his nose and taking a small whiff, sipping it in a manner of poise.

Her face paled. *Blood*.

Bastian’s tongue darted out to lick the corner of his mouth, chasing after a droplet of crimson that stood starkly against his pale skin. A white fang dug into his bottom lip.

Graves poked at the assortment of cheeses, nibbling at the pointed chunks. And Tharen immediately went for the carving knife stuck into the side of the hunk of lamb. He viciously sawed at the slab of meat, plopping a piece on his plate with a half-smirk. He took a bite, uncouth, as he forwent his cutlery. From underneath the table, one of his booted feet jostled the legs of the chair she was sitting in, and she quickly moved her feet away.

"Want some, little lamb?" Tharen questioned, lifting a piece of the lamb meat in front of him in a menacing promise. A bit of brown glaze dripped from the side, pooling against the surface of the table. "Or are you too… tired from your time in the dungeons?" The mage smirked, toying with her. Luella remembered his warm fingers against her lips, the way he had forced her to drink the potion; she was scared to bring up his drugging of her—accidental or not—lest she invoke his fury.

Luella gulped, watching as he eagerly ate the lamb, sucking the marinade off the ends of his fingers and keeping firm eye contact with her.

The King sighed before reaching for the empty plate in front of her, using tongs to fill it with nuts, roasted vegetables, and a few wedges of cheese. He cut away some meat, placing it on the platter, before then sitting it back down in front of her. His own plate was still empty.

"Eat." King Vale rested his chin in his hands, watching her.

It wasn’t a polite request. But an order.

Even though it went against all the etiquette that had been drilled into her from an early age, Luella rested her chin in her hand, eyes drooping slightly as she lifted a fork resting on top of one of the napkins, waiting to be used, and twirled it in the roasted vegetables.

“Hm… not hungry,” she replied sleepily, stifling a yawn. The exhaustion from earlier was back in full force. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was sitting down or if her fear of the males around her was causing her to overexert herself.

The King set down his utensils, a slight clatter noise ringing out as they hit the corner of his plate before he leveled her with a stern look. “If you don’t eat, I’ll force the food down your throat.”

“Why do you care so much? Shouldn’t you want me starving and miserable?” Luella was too tired and overwhelmed to pay heed to the way his jaw ticked at her words.

What’s the worst he could do? Kill her? Death would be a mercy at this point. At least then, she would not fear.

“What the King means is that he wants you to keep your strength up,” Bastian interjected, placing a heavy hand on her thigh under the table. Breath caught in her chest at the feel. His palm burned through the folds of her gown; though, his skin was cold.

Tharen rolled his eyes, and she noticed Graves press the back of his hand to his mouth, an infinitesimal twitch to his scarred mouth.

Luella sighed, a slight pout forcing its way to her lips without her permission. She clenched the fork in her hand to stop herself from tacking on another remark. Az wasn’t here. He couldn’t protect her from the dungeons. She would have to fend for herself for now. So, it was back to being obedient and quiet.

She stabbed her fork into a wedge of roasted potato that the King had loaded onto her plate, glistening in a brown, tangy marinade and spiced with cloves and garlic. It melted in her mouth.

Maybe she *was* hungry.

She took another bite, clearing the plate of the vegetables and nuts. She ignored the meat, wrinkling her nose at it, and instead popped a wedge of crumbly cheese into her mouth, humming around the intense taste. The table was utterly silent, save her slight sounds of contentment and satisfaction as she ate. Just when she was contemplating reaching for one of

the pastries on the tower, she looked up, meeting King Vale’s green, piercing eyes.

Luella swallowed around a piece of cheese, arrested by the way his fingers stroked his jaw, the many rings he wore glinting in the candlelight.

The King silently reached for an empty glass, filling it with a small pitcher of liquid, orange-colored and fizzy with bubbles. He slid it across the table to her, resting his chin on a palm and regarding her with something akin to amused interest. King Vale and Graves had a glass of wine, Tharen had a mug of foamy ale, and Bastian, his glass filled with thick blood. She was the only one at the table who had such a drink. Her hands clenched the edge of the table.

The King waited, and when Luella did not reach for the glass, he moved it closer with a finger, tapping against the side in warning. Her hand shook as she reached for the glass, lifting it to her lips for a small sip, praying it wasn’t poisoned. Honey and nectar exploded on her tongue. The bubbles fizzed against her tastebuds, tangy and slightly sour.

She licked her lips. "What is this?"

"Another little potion," Tharen said, without inflection. Luella set the glass down, and some sloshed over the lid from the movement. "I can feel the heat of your skin and the faint stutter of your heart when I reach out with my Body magic. You still aren’t fully healed from your sickness. That should take care of the last of it. Don’t worry." He smirked. "I paid extra attention to my measurements this time. You should only feel a… slight… drowsiness."

Luella did not want the potion to take effect while she was so vulnerable. She silently cursed the male, shooting him a look from under her lashes, all while desperately hoping it would not be as severe as last time. Though she couldn’t recall all of her memories after being taken from the dungeons, the way her limbs had felt heavy, and her inhibitions had lowered nagged at her. She couldn’t afford that here.

Bastian’s hand moved further up her thigh, gripping her skin through her dress. Luella shifted, and Graves looked down as though he could see through the table, right where Bastian’s hand was on her. Graves took a sip of his wine, tilting his head back to rest against the high back of the chair. The candlelight flickered on his face, and through the many windows, the light of the sun was nearly gone, leaving the purple of twilight in its wake. It made the aura of the dining room foreboding.

"Won’t you finish your plate, Princess?" King Vale steepled his fingers.

Luella eyed the meat on her platter, lip twitching with a scowl, and shook her head.

"What? Not good enough for you?" Tharen snorted, knocking back a large gulp of ale.

Graves let out a heavy sigh and leaned forward, plucking one of the pastries from the tower. It was flakey and buttery, covered in powdered sugar and apricot slices. He set it on a small dish before switching it out for the platter in front of her.

Graves cut into the meat on her stolen plate and took a bite. Luella couldn’t help but notice he was using the same fork she had put her mouth on. Something about that particular detail made her feel faint.

She didn’t thank him, even though a small bit of something similar to gratefulness welled up within her. But she stamped it down and buried it far under the piles of her anger. How could she feel grateful to such a male for something so simple as giving her food?

She had been robbed of so many rights that the barest of privileges made her grateful.

Quietly, she ate what Graves had given her, the apricot topping and soft mousse filling of the pastry turning to ash in her mouth as she remembered all the ones who would never have such luxuries again.

The King reached for dessert, as well, but he went for a bowl of fresh cream and berries topped with edible rose petals. Tharen snorted a laugh and reached for one of the strawberry tarts on the top tier of the tower of food. Unsurprisingly, Graves opted out of dessert, and Bastian kept sipping at his glass of blood.

"You will not be returning to the dungeons," King Vale suddenly said, and his words were final as they resounded throughout the room, leaving no space for argument.

"W-why?" Luella asked, placing her fork down, pastry half-eaten. She didn’t have the stomach to finish it. Her lids drooped again, and she took a deep breath to calm herself—she could not risk falling unconscious here.

"I knew fae were a weaker species but did not realize how much so until you fell ill from your stint in the dungeons. Not even a fortnight, and you were at death’s door. Tharen told me any longer, and you would have been beyond saving, even with the best of potions. I do intend for you to live, Princess, even if that means it will be in a gilded cage instead of one made

of iron. But do not forget, it will still be a cage. Even if you have a soft bed to fall into at night and warm food to fill your belly. I can take it all away in an instant. Don’t force my hand."

Bastian gulped down the last of his blood, setting the glass down on the table. He didn’t meet her eyes, and he cut a glare to the King.

There it was again. That tension between them.

The vampire’s thumb stroked over her thigh, and Luella wished the barrier of her gown was gone so she could feel his skin against hers.

"What about the demon?" she blurted.

"Demon?" King Vale raised a brow. Something unrecognizable flashed over his face before he locked the emotion down.

"Azgorath," she stumbled over his name. "In the cell that was next to m-mine." Luella shrunk under the weight of four sets of eyes against her, and she shrank back into her chair.

The King huffed a laugh. "What about him?"

She had asked, might as well follow through with it now. She *had* to save him.

"Why is Az in the dungeons?"

Tharen chuckled under his breath and gave a quick shake of his head, muttering, "Az." A white braid fell over his shoulder, and he flicked it back, tapping a finger against the table as he stared her down.

"He disobeyed me." King Vale steepled his fingers and sat back. "You won’t disobey me, will you?" His voice was a quiet caress, almost as tangible as the feel of Bastian’s fingers against her thigh. Like his very breath was sentient and reached out to her to curl around her and draw her nearer to him.

She gulped under the intensity of his words before stuttering an unintelligible sound.

The King laughed; it was soft, yet mocking and cold. "You better not. You see what happens when you disobey. Learn from his mistake. It would do well for you to please me, Princess. Nod if you understand."

Luella obeyed with a short nod, head lowering as she trained her attention on her lap. She clenched her hands together, gathering the folds of her gown in between her fingers. Bastian reached his pinky out to brush against hers. She quickly jerked her hand back at the cold feel of his skin, looking over at him.

The vampire didn’t let on what his hand was attempting under the safe cover of the table, he merely poured another glass of blood.

Luella tried not to feel like he was ignoring her because she had evaded his touch.

Suddenly, the double doors of the dining room opened, and a soldier covered in armor entered the room. He bore a staff in his hand, and etched onto the breastplate of his armor was the crest of Serpentis.

He quickly strode into the room, standing behind King Vale’s chair.

"I’m sorry, my King, we have just received word from the outermost villages on the eastern side of the kingdom. There has been a siege."

King Vale stood quickly, and Bastian followed suit, chair squeaking as he pushed back from the table. The vampire’s hand left her thigh, and she shuddered at the cool weight of his touch leaving her.

"Prima," King Vale jerked his head to Tharen. "To the war room. Graves, take the Princess back to her cage for the night." The King headed toward the doors, and Tharen followed after him, casting Luella one glance over his shoulder with those icy eyes as he answered the call of his ruler. "And Graves," King Vale called. "Don’t forget the lock."

The door slammed shut behind Tharen and the King, leaving her alone with the enigmatic shadow that was Graves.

The male stood slowly like he had all the time in the world.

"Come." Graves pulled Luella up with a gloved hand on her elbow, leading her back the same way she had come with Bastian—out the double doors, up the stairs, and down the hallway. Right to the door of her new home.

Her new cage. Gilded, as it may be.

Graves pulled a key from a hidden pocket in his shirt, not yet slotting it into the lock, just twirling it in a hand.

He suddenly pressed her close to the door, heat emanating from his body as he caged her in. From this close, Luella could see the faint dip at the top collar of his shirt, showcasing a small bit of tanned skin on his upper chest and over his collarbones. She hadn’t noticed before, but he wore a beautiful necklace. A silver chain, and from it, hung one small amulet. A purple stone, white swirling within it, like puffs of clouds trying to escape, and little specks of inky black dotted the exterior. It was held in a dainty weave of silver like the bars of a cage, keeping the beauty of the stone from shining freely.

She lifted a hand and brushed her fingertip against the cool stone, but Graves jerked back, a gloved hand pressed against the bare skin of her chest as he forced her to keep her distance. He looked at her with vexation, but it was combined with something else. Obsession or a compulsive need to dig inside her and figure out her secrets, while being frustrated by the allure.

Luella knew the feeling.

She felt hypnotized by him. Something deep in him calling to something deep in her. To that smell of sweet honey mingling with sharp cloves. She hated it but wanted to follow the thread and see where it led. Resented it but wanted to chase after it with abandon.

Her chest swelled as she took in a breath, and Graves's hand rose from the motion. She was acutely aware of him against her flushed chest. Even though his hands were covered with gloves, it was like the barrier wasn't even there. She felt his heat radiating through the fabric, burning her chest. Flushed with desire or the workings of the small sip of the potion that coursed through her veins.

She tilted her neck to look up at him. A hand skimmed over her side, and she remembered how he had attested to seeing her nude.

"Graves," Luella tasted his name on her lips, and the male froze, head canted. "When did you see me?" She didn't elaborate. Didn't even know why she was asking. The male was stingy with his words; why did Luella think he would even answer her?

"On a night when you thought you had everything…"

Her breath hitched, and as she stared up into his eyes, deep blue just like the lapis lazuli mined in the mountains of Medius, a few pieces of the puzzle clicked into place.

The faint caw of a raven echoed throughout her mind.

"You're—" Luella couldn't say it. The words burned her throat as she choked out, "You're the raven."

Graves's expression shuttered, once more becoming that closed-off mask she knew.

"Yes." His reply was cool.

Luella knew. This whole time, ever since Graves had shared seeing her nude, commenting on the birthmark on her thigh—a place no one had ever seen to her knowledge—she had known. She just hadn't wanted to believe it. Graves had saved her on their journey to Serpentis, the raven perched upon the limb of a tree, a black feather floating in the darkness of the forest

as he had appeared nearly out of thin air. The evidence had been there the whole time.

Even when she had first spotted the little bird on her windowsill, something about the creature had seemed off. Raven shifters weren't uncommon, but she had never seen one before, of course. And the appearance of a raven, in Solis no less…

So naive. So trusting.

She wanted to ask more. Ask *why*, *how*… Rant. Rave. Curse his name.

But Luella did none of that. She was tired. Tired of the secrets and the lies. Deception had a way of wearing you down. Would she ever get used to being in the dark? As a fae of the kingdom of sunlight, it felt like she lived in the dark far more than in the light. Maybe that was why the moon always called to her. Even now, it tempted her as it shone from outside the thin windows in the otherwise darkened halls.

Luella gave a nod as she swallowed thickly. Her eyes were wet with unshed tears—she would not dare let them fall—and they clung to her lashes. Graves's hand fell from her chest, dangling at his side like an afterthought as though he was waiting for something. For her to react. To do anything but stand in front of him like some boneless thing.

The male stepped back, and she drew a deep but shaky breath. Graves opened the door to her room and waited patiently for her to enter. She skirted around him, eyes never leaving his. Even when he fit the key into the lock and slowly closed the door. Even when it shut in her face. Even when she heard the faint click as it was locked.

Trapping her.

Luella rested her forehead on the wooden door, eyes closing and hands coming up to trace the lines in the wood like she was tracing imaginary veins.

Or following lines of a scar that marred the bewitching face she knew to be on the very other side of the closed door.

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Luella stumbled into bed face-first.

A long-suffering sigh fell from her lips, and she tiredly pulled a pillow close to her body as she tucked her hands under her chin and allowed her eyes to drift shut.

Thankfully, she was alone. For the first time with a right mind in what felt like lifetimes. And it was quiet.

But her thoughts wanted to be loud.

She buried her face in her pillow, shoving everything deep, deep down. She couldn’t. Not yet. Not now. It was all too much.

So, she counted imaginary flowers in a field behind her closed eyelids, forcing her body to keep still.

The grip on her pillow relaxed, her breaths evened out, and finally, she drifted off.

No dreams took her captive in the night. And no vampires stole into her mind. It was a restful and dreamless sleep. No sounds of screams or sights of blood assaulted her, and no scent of mold and dank cells enveloped her.

But—

No hands intertwined with hers through iron bars. No lullabies soothed her to sleep. She couldn’t hear the rumble of faint snoring and smell that inviting scent of burnt cocoa, rich and warm.

The night was restless. Many times, she awoke to a dry mouth and a pounding head. It felt like she drank too much wine. Out of sorts and

discombobulated, she had to reorient herself, sleepy thoughts filtering in as she reminded herself she wasn't in the dungeons. She was not tucked away in her tower in Solis. But in a room of opulence, a cage of gilded edges, lying beneath a fluttering canopy amid jewels and soft beauty. Every time, her heart clenched anew.

In the late, cold, quiet hours of the night, Luella awoke to her arm stretched out, palm facing upward as it awaited a hand that would not come —from a body that was tucked deep below in the castle, fitfully sleeping on hardened stone, while she curled up in the finest of silks and nestled herself between fluffy pillows and luxurious throws.

Somewhere, a raven cawed. And she had no idea if it was real or imagined.

With a huff, she fell back to sleep, tossing and turning the whole night away.

Sun filtered through the glass doors leading to the balcony, the first sight she saw upon blearily cracking open her eyes.

From how she had kept her arm extended all night, subconsciously reaching out for Az, it was numb and tingling. She tried to shake the feeling back into her limbs as she sat up. Her gown was rumpled from her fitful rest, and her mouth was dry with thirst.

She hoped the King wouldn't grow angry that she had ruined such a beautiful gown by sleeping in it. Or even worse, the maids.

Parting the canopy and rising from the bed, she arched her back, stretching her hands far above her. She let out a soft sigh of contentment from the night of rest, however fitful it had been, it was far better than the cold dungeons. Though she had slept in the bed the night prior, she didn't remember much, too loopy from the potion. But last night had been much better on her aching body—save for the way she couldn't get a certain demon expelled from her thoughts. She kept waking, thinking he would be right there, a strong and steady presence to ward off the shadows.

Luella skimmed her hand over the soft duvet, walking along the side and footboard until she stood in front of the glass doors that led to the balcony. The sun was high in the sky. It was late morning. She had slept for

a long time. Even though she knew it would be a futile endeavor, she tried the handles.

She sighed.

Locked.

There was a swift knock on the door, and she turned, seeing the two maids from the evening prior enter in a whirlwind. It must have been their personalities, to be so high-strung and no-nonsense. The silent, lithe maid with glittery scales and the red-haired, arduous leader. The shorter of the two quietly sat a silver tray with a teacup and teapot down on the small breakfast table pushed near the window, while the other met Luella’s eye with a cold look and crooked her finger to beckon her to follow, sweeping into the bathing chambers with sure steps.

Luella obeyed, not wanting to invoke the fiery angst that she knew the red-haired female to have.

Inside the bathing chamber, the maid was bent over the small bath set into the ground, pouring two bottles of oil into the water, already filled. Tendrils of steam wafted from the surface, and Luella’s toes clenched in anticipation of the warm bath.

"Disrobe," the maid commanded. "Ina has your morning tea set out for you once you bathe. Then she will do your hair."

Ina, the silent maid with scales on her cheeks. Luella was glad to be able to put a name to the face. If there was one she thought she could befriend, it would be Ina, not the fiery force of a female in front of her.

Her hands fumbled as she tried to reach the ties of the corset behind her. The maid glanced up, jaw clenched, as she took note that Luella was still wearing the gown from last night as if the fact had just registered with her. She stood from her crouching position, walking closer to Luella, and she looked up at the amid. She was a strong and tall female—a few heads taller than Luella—and she forced her body to still as the maid forced her to turn, undoing the laces, before dismantling the ensemble of the dress, carefully laying it over the back of a chair near the mirror wall.

Luella quickly stepped down into the bathing pool to cover her naked flesh. The water covered up to her breasts as she sank into the comforting warmth. It smelled of strawberries and vanilla, fresh and light and inviting. An incense stick was burning on the cart next to the pool—topped with a few extra vials of oil and soap.

Just like the night before, the maid quickly washed her hair and body, scrubbing her clean and roughly applying oils and balms to her skin once out of the water.

Luella was forced down into the chair in front of the vanity.

Ina traded places with the other maid—who went to nurse the tea—and heated the hairbrush with little sparks of her dragon fire before styling Luella’s hair to fall over one shoulder, the left side pinned back with a small, jeweled clip. A silky curl fell over Luella’s left cheek, and the heavy weight of her hair was laid over her right shoulder, the frizz tamed with oils and the hot brush.

"You are Ina?" Luella whispered, mindful of the other maid on the far side of the room. Ina’s eyes widened, but she gave a quick nod, the scales on her cheek catching the light that filtered into the room. "What is her name?" Luella softly inclined her head toward the other maid, careful not to disrupt Ina as she put the finishing touches on her hair.

Ina tapped her chin thoughtfully before resting her fingertip against the surface of the vanity. She slowly traced letters into the surface, and Luella watched with rapt attention.

"O…" Luella watched the female trace a circle on the surface of the vanity. She glanced up to meet her green eyes, and the maid nodded. "O… sa?" Luella questioned. A soft, pleased smile graced the maid’s lips, and she tucked a short strand of brown hair behind her ear. "Osa." Luella smiled, but they both flinched when the red-haired maid, Osa, set a cup of tea down on the vanity in front of Luella with a clatter.

Osa’s lip curled as she shot Ina a look. "Drink quickly now. It’s a hibiscus blend with honey and lemon extract to help with any lingering sickness. But it will be less potent than anything the Prima would give you."

Luella cradled the small cup in her hands, taking a sniff of the warm liquid before slowly sipping on it. It burned her tongue slightly, but the pain rid her of the last of her drowsiness, forcing her to awaken completely.

"Thank you," she whispered, taking another sip of tea.

Osa did not respond, the female simply went to the wardrobe and pulled out a gown from within. Ina urged Luella to stand, and Luella was handed a slip, the material thin and silky against her skin as she stepped into it. She steadied herself with a hand on Ina’s shoulder as the gown was pulled up her legs and the laces tied. Osa scurried around her, fiddling with the

sleeves and making sure everything was up to her very high standards, no doubt.

"There," Osa said, spinning Luella to face a mirror next to the wardrobe, and she swallowed a gasp at the sight.

The dress was not as intricately designed as the one from yesterday evening, but still breathtaking. For the cold weather, it was a long-sleeved gown, warming her body. It was thick yet cozy, with sleeves that billowed out toward the bottom. A simple white fabric embellished with silver and gold lines intercrossing over the arms and bodice, falling like pieces of snow down the front to grow dense at the bottom. The fabric gathered under her breasts with a golden clasp, the material bunching up where it was kept held together—the focal point of the gown. The neckline was simple, a soft dip that rested right over the swell of her chest, not as adventurous or revealing as last night, but more than what Luella was comfortable with. Much more revealing than she normally would wear.

It was winter, as a dress. Coldness, as a gown. Like the faint sound of snow falling against the earth, it rustled as she moved, like stormy nights finding solace under a blanket and days huddled by the fire, it wrapped her up in its embrace, yet remained light as air.

Her hands fluttered over her hips, hesitant to touch the material of the gown. The female staring back at her was as foreign as another realm.

Osa gave a nod before looking at Ina. "No rouge or kohl?"

Ina shook her head in response, trailing the tip of her finger over Luella’s cheekbone and down to her jaw. Luella tried not to flinch back at the intrusive touch.

"You’re right," Osa commented, her tone bitter. "It’s not needed after a night’s rest. Sickening." She fit a hand on Ina’s shoulder and steered her to the door. Osa did not turn to look at Luella, but Ina did, tucking a piece of brown hair behind her ear, scales glimmering, before giving Luella a meek smile like she was apologizing for Osa’s harshness.

They weren’t gone but a few moments before the door opened again. Somehow, Luella knew who it would be before she even saw him.

"Good morning, pet. Or should I say good afternoon?" Bastian strolled into the room, suit dapper and mood far too chipper. He must have had some extra blood this morning. "What? You don’t want to speak with me? Not after I’ve kept you alive?" Bastian sat on the edge of her bed, fingers toying with the canopy, as he peered at her from behind a piece of sheer

fabric. His reddened eyes were half-lidded, and the sensuality that clung to him made her flush. It was a seductive pose—with him sitting on the same bed she had slept on, face half obscured by the fluttery, sheer material of the canopy like he was beckoning her to join him.

She backed up, her thighs hitting the edge of the vanity. "N-no," she stuttered. "Good morning."

Bastian smiled, pleased, and dropped the fabric, standing quickly. "As much as I would like to lay on your bed all day and stay in this room with you, pet, I did come here for a reason." He drew closer to her, and she had nowhere else to turn to. She had backed herself into a corner. He slotted a hand against her cheek, thumb brushing over her skin. She inhaled his addicting scent, eyes fluttering shut.

"You smell divine this morning," Bastian revealed, head lowered and strands of his black hair tickling her face as he bent over her. "Did you rest well?"

"Yes," Luella nodded, mad that she did not have any rouge to cover her blushing cheeks this time.

The vampire hummed under his breath, and it rumbled through her with how close she was to him. He suddenly stepped back and offered out a hand to her. "Let’s go. I’m to take you to breakfast. Though, I’m not sure if it could be considered as such this late in the day."

She placed her hand in his, quietly allowing herself to be led out of the room and back to the dining room.

Along the way, Bastian kept his hand firmly wrapped around hers, refusing to let go, even as he sat her down in a chair and pushed it in for her, lifting a chair and moving it right beside hers. He sat down, his thigh pressing against hers.

No one else was in the room, just the two of them, and the table was not laden with an elaborate spread this morning, just a canter of citrus juice and a large platter of toasts with a few different types of jams and butter resting beside it, and the pastry tower stood in the middle of the table, a dwindling supply of sweet bread decorating it.

Bastian lifted a small butter knife and spread out some dark plum jam on a piece of browned toast, placing it on the dish in front of her.

"Eat up," the vampire instructed. He repeated the motion but chose a strawberry spread for his topping.

Luella tried to cover her shock as he took a large bite.

"You can eat?" Luella asked, peering over at him from under her lashes as she, too, took a bite of her toast, but a much smaller than the one Bastian took.

"Yes." He swallowed the toast and reached for two glasses, filling them with an orange-colored juice; he slid one over to her and took a sip of his own. "I can. I quite enjoy human food, in fact. It does nothing for me, though. Not like blood." He looked at her like he was waiting for her to grow angry at the mention of him drinking blood, but when she stayed silent, he continued. "Nothing will ever give the same satisfaction or nutrients as blood will, but solid food has its merits. Strawberries, for one." He winked at her, taking another bite of his toast topped with strawberry jam.

"Oh," Luella managed. She wished she had her study books with her to compare what she had learned of vampires and see if it was common knowledge.

They both grew silent as Luella finished her toast and washed it down with a few sips of juice.

She wondered why she felt so content and… almost *safe*… in the presence of Bastian, but he had not hurt her. Not like the King or Tharen and Graves. Something about Bastian reminded her of Az, a comforting presence. He had done her no harm, only gone out of his way to keep her safe, even if it was a nonconventional way of doing so. In his mind, trapped meant safe.

Luella reached for the bowl of fruit near the toast platter, popping a grape in her mouth. It nearly fell out of her mouth as a set of hands settled heavily on her shoulders.

"Hello to you, Princess," Tharen breathed over her neck. She quaked at the feeling of his hands on her shoulders, and he quickly swept a palm down her back before taking a seat at the head of the table—King Vale’s seat.

The Prima was shirtless, his tanned skin glistening with sweat. Luella had seen him without a shirt more than she had seen him with one. It seemed to be common for the warrior mage.

He kicked his boots up on the table and leaned back. Mud and dirt coated the bottoms of his boots, and she noticed a few red stains along his pants.

Tharen’s lips curved up into a dangerous mockery of a grin. A snarl masquerading as a smile, daring her to come closer, all while warning her to stay far away, lest she want to be torn to shreds by his glinting teeth and desperate claws. His eyes never left hers, even when he turned to speak to Bastian.

"Bastian," he taunted. "I see you got back safe, and where’s the first place you crawl to? Or should I say *who*? Hm?"

Got back safe? Luella furrowed her brow, from her deep sleep and frazzled morning, she had forgotten all about what broke up the dinner from yesterday. The soldier who had arrived and informed the King of a siege on one of the villages. But that couldn’t possibly be right, could it?

Who would dare to instigate an attack on Serpentis? They were feared. They were the enemy, the cruel force of evil that threatened the other kingdoms. Who possibly would attempt an attack? And who could get away with it?

She wracked her brain, trying to remember her world history and politics lessons, but came up short. Couldn’t pinpoint any kingdom that had the means to stage an attack on Serpentis. Even the outermost villages, smaller and isolated, were still populated by fearsome dragon shifters with their fire and serpents with their venom, used as a defense to ward off attackers.

Bastian gripped Luella’s thigh. "And you, Prima? Just got back and look where you are," he commented. "Don’t feel invincible in your house of glass. You’re like the rest of us." He shifted his eyes to Luella, then abruptly changed the topic. "Where are the rest?"

"Around," Tharen drawled. He suddenly leaned up and reached over her, right for the tower of pastries. His bare arm brushed against her chest, and she suppressed a shudder.

The mage nabbed a pastry topped with a few fruit chunks. He looked up at her from under his lashes as he plucked a glazed, red berry from the top and sucked on it.

Bastian sighed heavily. "Fucking juvenile bastard."

Luella wasn’t sure what all the fuss with the berries was about, but this wasn’t the first time she had been taunted with the red fruit.

Bastian stood suddenly, offering a hand to her, and she took it, a little less hesitant this time. Tharen watched the whole exchange with rapt focus.

"Don’t gorge yourself on the berries, Prima. They can be sweet and tempting, but you *can* have too much of a good thing."

Bastian led Luella from the room, confident as he strode up the stairs, before depositing her back at her gilded cage, a lingering look in his reddened eyes and a hard set to his sculpted jaw.

Suspended in the false safety of her strange cage, every moment had been spent waiting, on pins and needles, for everything to come crashing down around her.

And she was getting tired of it.

There she sat, bare feet kicking against the side of the bed as she stared out the glass windows overlooking the beautiful mountain ranges and dimming light of the evening.

After Bastian had dropped her back off at her room once they finished eating, she had been left alone for hours. Not even the maids came to her. There was no clock to tell the hour, only the sun, as it fell lower and lower in the sky, gave her any hint of the passage of time.

She very well felt like she might go insane. Her mind was filled with screams from the gallows, blood pooling against the cracked stone stage; torn-apart limbs strewn across the marble of the castle floor assaulted her every time she closed her eyes.

The cawing of a raven followed after her like a phantom. At this point, she had no inkling if she was actually hearing the bird or if it was all in her head. But she swore she heard the faintest caw every now and again from outside the shut balcony doors.

She squinted, peering out into the dim evening. Nothing was there, just the faint puffy white clouds that dotted the sky, the moon rising slowly while the sun set. Even though it was nearly night, Luella was not tired.

No, she was very much awake.

No matter how hard she tried to fall asleep and forget it all, she was bombarded with the gruesome images she had seen in her horror-filled new life. She couldn’t leave this room and couldn’t sleep to escape. So, she sat. She tried to drown out the images that threatened to drag her under their spell with memories of warm touches and warmer skin. Lullabies and soft

fingers that tickled against her palms as she drifted off, twirling strands of her matted hair—hair that should have been entirely off-putting but was touched like the purest strands of woven gold.

Luella flopped back against the bed, scrubbing her eyes with her palms like she might conjure up images of Az.

Her fingers tapped against her lower stomach as she thought of the demon. Her last memories of him were hazy in sickness, but one thing rang true: his worry-stricken voice calling out, *I'll come for you.*

What if she could be the one to come for him?

Revenge simmered low, not at all forgotten. It had only grown as she sat in her misery and contemplation, hope withering and falling to the ground, listless, like the petals of a flower. Luella did not know how, why, or when, but she would have her revenge, even if it was the last thing she ever did. Which it would be. If she made it close enough to the King to hurt him and enact her revenge, she would have no chance of escaping with her life. Not with his watchful guard.

And certainly not with the Prima. Or his Advisor and the solemn shadow of Graves.

A fact she had resigned herself to was her death, one way or another.

But perhaps not…

Not with Az. Luella had never anticipated the protective demon. A friend in this palace of foes. With his strength and blood oath to her, she couldn't fall to harm under his binding promise. She would have to find some way to get to him. Escape and plot, come back to finish what King Vale had started.

With a blooming hope in her chest, she drifted off to sleep.

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ESCAPE BETWEEN PAGES

"This way, pet." Bastian led her down one of the unexplored hallways of the palace, her arm tucked in the crook of his elbow.

She had spent all of yesterday alone, besides breakfast, even Ina and Osa had not shown up to prepare her for bed. They arrived this morning with tea and dressed her, but no more face paints, just a few oils dabbed behind her ears and on the inside of her wrists, before they quickly left.

Luella was wearing a less ornate gown again today—a fluttery, scarlet, and silver weave of fabric that stretched down her hands into points and hugged her waist tightly. Her golden hair flowed free and was unstyled, tumbling over her shoulders and falling down her back. It was slightly frizzy and untamed, just the way she liked it. She tucked a curl behind her arched ear, and Bastian tracked the motion.

The vampire’s step slowed, and she had to match his gait in order to stop from hitting his back. His head tilted as he regarded her. Strands of his silken black hair fell over his temple, and the many silver jewels that lined his lobes caught the dim light in the halls, sparkling. She swallowed, her gaze on his neck as she watched the delicate swirls of tattoos that curled over his collar. Bastian cleared his throat, and Luella jerked her eyes up to his; the ever-present fear that followed her roared to life at the intense fascination on his sensual features, his plump lips slightly parted and brows raised.

"Just because King Vale is keeping you prisoner here does not mean you have to live tucked away in your room, pet. There’s much to do here. Parties, galas, horse riding in the meadows, strolling through the orchards, and fairs in the markets, you’ll come to love it here." Bastian’s thumb brushed over the back of her hand as they strolled down the hall.

This vampire… He was hot and cold. Switching from a captor to the persona of a suitor at the mere drop of a hat. She couldn’t figure out his angle, what made him so interested in her.

"I don’t think I could ever go into those orchards again without hearing the sounds of screams," Luella whispered. She would have never said such a thing in front of the others, but with Bastian, she felt a bit freer. Safer. As free as a caged bird could get, that is.

Something in his expression shuttered, but not before she caught sight of a flash of anger in his eyes. The brown flecks were more prominent today, and it made him look less deadly. If not for the flash of his fangs and unnaturally pale skin, he would have appeared human.

He stopped, and she almost bumped into him at the sudden halt, but he steadied her with a hand on her arm, a tight grip on her shoulders as he stared deep into her eyes.

"If you could have anything right now, what would you ask for?" Bastian beseeched.

"Freedom." The word was a soft exhale.

Pain fell across him in a harsh wave, eyes closed, and features pinched —a tiny crease between his dark brows that made him look more *alive*— before he once more met her gaze. This time, with a stricken look. "I cannot give you the freedom you seek, pet. Name a desire, whatever your heart wishes, save that one thing. If it’s conceivable and does not go against the will of the King, consider it yours."

Luella felt overcome as her brain spun to figure out a loophole, perhaps. What wouldn’t go against the wishes of such a cruel King? Her parents were dead, her kingdom was destroyed, and her freedom was unattainable. What was left but escape of another kind?

"Books," she said, voice low and slightly breathless.

Bastian nodded. "That, I can do."

He spun, grabbing her wrist as he stalked onwards, pulling her as she stumbled along behind him.

Winding and twisting down corridors and passages, he led her down the halls, and they came to a stop at an area Luella had not yet seen.

It was a simpler hallway, with a lone set of double doors set at the very end. The ceilings were higher here, and the air was crisp like a window was open somewhere, but she couldn’t see one lining the white-painted walls—golden trim etched into the sides; the floor was bare and echoed their hurried footsteps back to her ears, bouncing off the tall ceilings and hollow spaces.

Bastian halted in front of the doors. He placed a hand on it, pausing as he gave her a strange look. "Remember that it is because of me that you have this." His tone was a quiet rumble, yet a firm decree, unwavering but hesitant.

He wanted her to remember this act of kindness. And Luella suddenly thought of silken ties and promises to save her life.

Maybe this vampire was not so cold and cruel after all. The same couldn’t be said for the rest of King Vale’s court, but maybe just this one creature held enough kindness to get her through the rest of her days.

Bastian pushed open the doors.

Luella stumbled into the library, mouth falling open at the glorious sight.

Books.

Shelves and shelves of books. Endlessly stretching on in every direction. The ceilings were high and vaulted, a skylight above letting in the midday sun, and the light refracted as it filtered in, casting little rainbows against her cheeks and the backs of her hands. Kaleidoscopes of color fell over the spines of some of the books that rested on little desks scattered about the room.

The place stole her breath away… Bright and airy, yet still with the distinctive manner of a library. A little waterfall of trickling blue was set into one of the far walls, high, high above. It cascaded in a perfect stream, before falling into a small pool of water. She waited for it to overflow or splash against the spines of the nearby books, but it never did. Even though the water kept trickling into the small pool, it stayed at a perfect height, lapping against the scalloped edges of the golden-brushed fount. Enchanted to forever flow in a display of the most perfectly choreographed dance.

It was wholly different than the library at Solis. The one at her home had been closed off with scant natural light, dark paint on the walls, and a

bitter librarian hobbling about with a permanent scowl etched onto her face and a long robe trailing behind her wherever she went.

This place was a dichotomy to its home of a cruel ruler. Open and welcoming. Inviting and pleasant.

Luella could live here.

Alcoves lined the walls, plush seats set into them piled high with blankets and pillows, just waiting to be inhabited. She imagined herself curling up with a book and wrapping a blanket around her and dozing off under the waning light of the sun.

She sighed, heart full of longing.

Luella stopped her perusal of the room, the slow circle she had been making coming to an end right before Bastian.

A blush rose to her cheeks; she realized she had completely forgotten about him as she took in the wonders around her.

If she didn't know better, she would have sworn there was amusement in his red-tinted eyes. He raised a brow.

"Go play," Bastian said. His tone was lighter, almost teasing.

Luella waited for the catch. There must have been one.

But it didn't come.

Bastian merely sauntered over to one of the desks and sat down, leaning back against the edge of the table and never taking his eyes off her. He steepled his fingers, elbows rested atop the wooden surface. It reminded her of an audience at a theater, raptly watching performers of a play like their every move was one not to be missed, like their every move was one specifically catered to entertain the viewer.

That was how Bastian looked at her.

Still as a statue, Luella did not break away from her spot. She waited for him to move, to say or do something—or even for some foe to storm in, wage an attack, and break up this fragile peace that had been extended to her in an olive branch.

When none of that came, she hesitantly shifted, eyes breaking away from his and landing on the never-ending rows of books, unsure which direction she wanted to go first. Her fingers trailed over the spines that rested on the tables. She read the titles, seeing mostly nonfiction and history books.

She had had enough of that. She itched for a story. Something to fall into and forget, escape this nightmarish reality which she currently lived.

Luella wandered around, flitting from one area to the next as she searched for stories. And finally, she found them. With a soft smile, her fingers delicately pulled a worn, leather-bound tome from one of the lower shelves. Reverently, hands traced over the etchings on the cover as she recognized the title as one she had read before and loved.

Nostalgia gripped her, and Luella held the book close to her chest. The old her—who read this book under a blanket of stars on a bed of grass—never would have imagined some version of herself in the future would reminisce over those days with desperate fondness. Time was strange. It made you yearn for even the worst of times and detest the best of them.

She surreptitiously glanced to Bastian, only to find him watching her with a small quirk to his sensual lips. Deciding to ignore him, she padded to one of the alcoves, crawling on her hands and knees across the large seat built into the wall. Half of her body was concealed from the way the alcove was tucked into the wall, but if she craned her head, she could still see Bastian, who quickly chose another spot to sit once he saw how Luella tried to conceal herself from him.

She huffed a sigh, pulling one of the blankets over her lap as she curled up, legs tucked under her and her back resting against plush pillows as she cracked open the spine of her chosen book.

Many hours passed in nebulous silence, the seconds blurring and blurring into one long stretch. And she savored every bit of it. The time ticking away in a strange fall of rippling water and the soft crinkle of pages being turned. Her breaths were joined by Bastian’s nearly inaudible inhales. His scent of bergamot mingled with the ink and paper scent surrounding her.

Bastian’s attention was burning her skin, making her throat dry, but not once did she look up at him, too afraid to disrupt this false safety she had carved out. Even when he started rapping his knuckles against the wooden table he was leaning on—as if he were some small child begging for attention or affection. She remained as quiet as a mouse, knees tucked to her chest as she fell into the story with abandon.

A small table adorned with tea cups, little puffed pastries, and grapes was forced into her line of sight as it was placed precariously to settle next to her on the seat.

Luella jerked her head up, meeting eyes of the deepest of blues.

Graves.

She didn’t know what to think of the male. Now that his secret was out, she felt anger around him. And also fear of what else he could be hiding. What else was hidden under the shadows that clung to him, the darkness that was just out of sight, lingering like the truth of his shifted form—the feathers and the soft caws that revealed his true nature as a voyeur?

She pressed her body further back into the alcove, completely forgetting about her book, as Graves leaned over the seat. He was uncovered, his hood pushed back and cowl down around his neck. But he still wore his usual gloves, and one finger came to notch under her chin, forcing her head up to meet his eyes.

"It’s time for your dinner."

"O-okay," she stuttered, snapping her book shut and holding it up in front of her chest like a shield.

How did she behave around him now that she knew what he was? Everything had changed. A strange burning radiated in her lower belly at the memory of him pressing her against the door, the scratchy quality of his voice as he spoke to her, the way his eyes had glinted as he remembered seeing *all* of her…

She couldn’t meet his eyes.

Graves moved his hand back and gestured to this small spread of food. "Eat."

The cushion she was sitting on dipped under his weight as he perched on the edge, resting his elbows on his knees.

It didn’t seem like he was going to leave.

Luella did feel hungry, though. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed with her reading, but with a glance up to the skylight, she saw the purplish hues of dusk dotting the expanse of the sky. She shifted her weight, joints creaking from how long she had been sitting, and hesitantly grabbed a small, square pastry that was coated in powdered sugar and slightly spongy under her fingertips. Its nutty flavor melted on her tongue as she chewed the soft texture of the pastry. Powdered sugar stuck to her lips and dusted her

hands, she licked her fingertips, glancing up at Graves from under her lashes when he made a soft sound.

"Where’s Bastian," she mumbled around the pastry.

Graves cleared his throat, voice a deep grumble as he said, "He had to step away, but he asked me to bring you dinner and stay with you for the rest of the evening."

Luella hummed in acknowledgment, sugar-sticky fingers grasping a succulent, purple grape, and she popped it into her mouth, chewing softly.

Graves lifted the pot of tea, and a stream of steam escaped from the spout, spilling over the lip of the white teacup as he poured. He silently offered it to her, careful not to let her touch anything but the delicate handle so she wouldn’t burn her hands from the heat.

"Thank you," Luella whispered, before taking a small sip of the scorching liquid. It was an earthy blend but paired well with the lingering taste of sugar and nuts from the pastry.

Graves didn’t pour himself a cup, but he did reach for a few grapes, throwing them up in the air, one by one, as he caught them in his mouth. The action was carefree, unlike his usually withdrawn countenance. She felt the urge to smile.

He settled back against the wall, stretching a leg out as he pulled his hood up over his head to shield his eyes from her.

She could still see the lower half of his face, the white scar that cut into the side of his left lip and up into his cheek, it stood out stark from the dark shadows made by the hood of his cloak. Graves remained silent and unmoving. Luella took a slow sip of her tea, letting the liquid warm her insides and take away the potent fear she felt around him, from his nearness. When moments passed, and he still did not move, she quietly lowered the book to her lap and opened it back up to her spot, peeking at him from the corner of her eye every so often. She couldn’t find peace with him so close. At least Bastian had given her the elusion of a personal space, but it seemed Graves didn’t know the concept.

"I won’t bite, little bird." The scar on his cheek tugged as he bit his lip to stop a smile.

Little bird. Her lip curled. She couldn’t help herself when she said, "No, but you will watch."

Graves tilted his head, his hood falling back to his shoulders. "And who’s to say you don’t like me watching?"

Luella grew speechless under his unwavering stare, cheeks burning.

"I-I don’t," she managed. "Not when I’m trying to read."

"But you like the idea for other occasions?" Graves reached for another grape, and she tried to ignore how attractive he looked as his lips wrapped around the purple flesh of the fruit.

"Never," she hissed. "And don’t call me a little bird. You’re the only bird here."

Grave laughed under his breath. She was suddenly all too aware of the fact that this male had seen her bare as she remembered disrobing in her rooms while he watched from the windowsill as his raven counterpart. She shivered, yet her skin grew flushed.

She grew silent, sipping on her tea as she tried to settle her nerves and fall back into her book. But try as she might, Luella could not quiet her mind long enough to slip away into the story. Graves’s eyes burned her cheeks, and she was acutely aware of every sound he made, the quiet rustle of fabric as he shifted on the seat, soft chewing noises as he snacked on the grapes, his quiet rumbles of acknowledgment whenever Luella peeked up at him…

The sounds were quiet but deafening, and she couldn’t force the awareness away.

After some time, when the glass dome above let in the inky blackness of night, Luella snapped the book shut, unable to feign concentration any longer.

"May I go rest now?" She was proud that her voice didn’t falter, but her tone was still hushed, as though she feared him reaching out and striking her with those strong, gloved hands.

She peeked up at him, and she noticed his lips curved into a pleased, half-smirk, as though he enjoyed tormenting her so.

Luella wished she was different. Wished she could lash out with her words and not cower. But she was still so scared. She felt like she was living in a fog, and one wrong move would dispel the cloud of tentative safety around her and leave her drifting, unmoored, and destitute. Ripe for killing and vulnerable in a den of beasts.

I can’t, she thought. *I just have to survive. However that happens. I must.*

Graves nodded and stood, leaving the nearly empty tray on the seat—no doubt for a servant to come clean up later. He held out a gloved hand for

her.

She placed her palm in his, a little more used to touching him, but the slight zap of tingles that radiated up through her fingertips and to her elbow startled her all the same. Even through the cloth of his glove, she felt it—shocks, like small lightning bolts zipping through her nerves. She swallowed and attempted to ignore it; though, his hand tightened around hers.

Was it possible he felt it, too?

He pulled her to her feet and into his body, only a hairsbreadth of space between them as he lowered his head to whisper, "You may take the book with you. The King doesn’t allow any of these to be taken out of the library, but for you, he wouldn’t mind. I’m sure he can forgo his controlling rules for such a pretty face." Graves’s breath tickled her ear as he spoke, and his words made her flush, her lip rolling between her teeth at the notion he found her *pretty*. "But don’t tell anyone."

The raven shifter moved to pick up the book, pressing it into her palms before he closed her fingers around the spine. The rough material of the gloves scratched against her skin, but Luella found she didn’t mind it so much. A reminder of who he truly was, something to be kept secret.

She took the book and clutched it tightly to her, afraid he would change his mind.

In her silence, he grew contemplative, and as if driven by some unknown force, his finger came up to press against her lips, deep blue eyes shining like the purest of jewels. Her breath hitched, and she jerked back at the intrusive brush against the softness of her skin. His finger followed the movement, pressing against the seam of her lips. She looked up at him from under her lashes. The pad of his glove scratched against her lips—a feeling like nothing she had ever experienced before. Coarse yet comforting. Just like the male himself.

"Do I have your word this stays between us?" Graves implored.

Luella nodded, and his finger moved with the motion, indenting the middle of her lip from how forcefully he pressed it into her. She had a sinful and traitorous thought from deep within her subconscious bubble up to the forefront of her mind: how she wished the glove was gone and his bare flesh was against hers.

Seeming pleased by her acquiescence, Graves made a hushed, placating sound before gently lifting his finger away.

And then he grew silent once more.

All the way down the lonesome hall leading to the library and back up to her room, he stayed vigilant and quiet, uttering not one word before inserting the key into the lock of her door and unlocking it with a soft click. He pressed a hand on her shoulder and, in a rather subdued motion, urged her inside.

His lapis lazuli eyes burned into hers, and she felt the weight of that heat travel through every bit of her before the doors shut once more, and the lock was back in place. In a near mirror of the other night, she was trapped.

Luella ran a finger down the cover of the book. But this time, her mind could escape, at least.

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WRITHING INFERNO

Loud, jarring screams echoed throughout Luella's mind, reverberating through her dream space like a murder of crows come to relay a harbinger of death.

She kicked her feet out, limbs tangling in silken sheets as her mind forced her to sift through memories of rolling heads and dismembered bodies, the sick crack of broken bones…

She opened her eyes, only to see a sight that had plagued her for the last few weeks. A sense of repeating the past washed over her, and as the fleeting sands of her realistic nightmare slipped through her fingertips, she felt her throat close up at the image.

But now she knew the name that fit the face of the male looming above her. Tharen.

In a strange mockery of their first meeting—that wretchedly fateful night in which he stole into her tower and dragged her from slumber with a dagger against her throat and a twisted glint in his eyes—the mage once more was on top of her, pulling her from her nightmares, only to awaken to one even worse. A living nightmare. She had no escape. Not even in her waking reality.

The Prima was on top of Luella, a hand resting casually at the base of her throat, not gripping, merely laying across the delicate skin there as if in a soft warning of what he was capable of.

His lips twisted into a wicked grin, one side of his mouth curving higher than the other in a lopsided, fiendish smile. His features were severe, the hollows under his cheeks filled with shadows, eyes dark with unsaid promises that weighed heavily in the scant space between them.

His smell was entrancing.

Ice and fresh-fallen snow. Crisp and inviting and starkly cool.

Luella’s eyes shuttered, and she gave one last kick of her foot to try and force him away. But it was no use.

"If I knew how easy it was to get you writhing underneath me, I would’ve made my way to your bed much sooner, Princess," Tharen sneered.

"G-get off," Luella stuttered, her hands pushed weakly at his muscled chest—bare, of course. Fingers splayed over the ridges and hard lines of him, and she distantly thought this was the first time she had ever touched a male’s naked chest before.

The crisp scent of snow cascaded over her, and one of her hands fell back against the soft pillows, tangling with strands of her golden hair, as he leaned forward, nose pressing right against hers so harshly that the tip of it was smushed. A large, unyielding knee came to settle between her legs, slotting into that space nestled high up between her thighs. She gasped at the sharp pulse that speared through her from the firm pressure…

A foreign tingling.

Unwelcome touches bred sparks of something that must have been pleasure shooting through her veins, causing her toes to curl against silky sheets and plush blankets.

Her bare leg brushed against Tharen’s foot, and the heat of his skin made her heart stutter in her chest. A stutter that turned to a gallop as he moved his head to press his face into the crook of her neck. He breathed deeply, like he was savoring her scent as much as she was his.

"What are you doing?" she breathed.

"Taking what’s mine. *Savoring* what’s mine." The grumble of Tharen’s words vibrated against her neck, and she felt it throughout her whole body.

"I’m not yours," she gasped, and the sound of it surprised her. She had never made such a breathy sound before. Tharen must have liked it; he growled low at the noise, one of his large hands spreading across her waist.

"You are. Everything about you is mine." He lifted off of her slightly, pulling one of her legs up with a firm grip around her calf. The sheets fell

away, as did the short hem of her gown—it settled at the junction of her thighs, baring a small strip of the pure, white fabric of her panties. With an insistent stroke along the arch of her foot, he said, "Even down to your little toes, you’re mine."

The action caused her back to bend, forcing her chest even further into his. His touch tickled, pleasant little sparks radiating from the trail of his deft fingers.

Somehow, she didn’t feel quite scared. Threatened, perhaps. But not with the promise of violence… Threatened with the promise of pleasures unknown to a fae heirus like her.

A new curiosity of the unknown flared within her.

While something more sinister roared to life.

The fragile peace she had found with Bastian—and even more hesitantly, Graves—was shattered. The illusion ripped away callously as she remembered.

With every touch on her body and those icy blue eyes that bore into hers, Luella remembered. Remembered a dagger against her throat, being chased throughout the bloodied, dark halls of Solis.

A small part of her also remembered how Tharen had ripped apart the males who threatened to touch her. *Hurt* her. He had done so without a second thought. But Luella shoved those memories down. Not willing to focus on what it all could mean—for her and her future as a captive.

Luella had no misgivings of the nature of her captivity—one founded in cruelty, the glint of swords, broken and bloodied bodies, and pleas to live. Somewhere along the way, she had grown complacent in this new life. Perhaps it had started in the dungeons with Az… The safety he had offered her from his blood vow had lulled her into a false sense of security. Just like those lullabies he had hummed to her each night, chasing the nightmares away.

Then Bastian, with his sweet words and sinful vows, promises to keep her alive, no matter what, and the gift of freedom and escape that could only be found between the pages of a book. Even Graves, the silent watcher and feathered liar he was, had not laid a finger of malice on her, only with those scorching deep eyes as he explored her with something more invasive than touch: his mind.

With all of it, she had forgotten. And in the absence of King Vale, especially, she had forgotten. Now, with Tharen, the Prima of Serpentis,

atop her with a leg between her thighs, pressing into the softness of her heat, and his large body caging her in against cool, sleep-rumpled sheets, she felt a familiar fury rekindle. A small spark that sputtered and whined with its desire to be let loose into an inferno of flames.

But that fury was not something Luella was used to giving in to. So, she made herself smaller.

Like always.

Though Tharen’s leg was slotted between hers, and his face buried in her neck, he did not move, only breathed deep, holding his body utterly still save for the rise and fall of his chest as he took her in—caged her in. Her chest was forced close to his, and through the thin gown, she felt her breasts press against his hot, bare flesh, the muscles on his stomach rippling with power as he held himself up over her.

Panic seized her lungs. What was he going to do to her? He could do whatever he desired; she was wholly at his mercy.

"W-wha—" she started, but he silenced her with a finger against her lips, head bent down so low the tip of his nose brushed against hers. Her entire body was shaking.

Tharen shifted, and one of her thighs fell further open, her hips brushing against his.

"*Fuck*," Tharen groaned. "They’ll kill me—" he cut himself off, but Luella had a strange sense that he was referring to the others.

Was he not supposed to be here?

As Tharen pressed himself along the line of her body and settled into the crook of her parted thighs, hips pressing against hers as they fell open even more, a soft groan fell from his lips as though he couldn’t quite help himself—she lifted her hands to shove him away, palms against the hard muscles of his chest like she might move such a beast.

"Please." A whimper was torn from her lips.

Luella didn’t know what she was pleading for. To be saved, or something… *else*?

He nosed the expanse of her lithe neck, whispered breaths against her pale skin, against her fluttering pulse point. His scent was heady and vibrant, like she was standing outside in a snow flurry. A soft whine was pulled from somewhere deep within her at his smell, at his touch, at his weight, where he rested firmly on her small body.

Never before had she felt so fuzzy and undone. Never before had she felt so splayed open and laid bare.

Luella still didn’t know if it was a welcome sensation or not. But she had an inkling that it wouldn’t have mattered to the mage. She didn’t have a choice in this.

Even as she breathed in his scent like she had been starved of oxygen her whole life and had only just been granted the ability to breathe. Even as she reveled in the small sparks of pleasure radiating from where his thigh was pressed between her legs.

Even then. No choice.

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, trailing along her temple.

His breath rattled in his lungs as he breathed her in one last time before extricating himself, fingers slipping through the strands of her golden hair like silken threads, chest lifting from where it was pressed against the soft swell of her breasts, and hands skimming over her waist and ribs as he pulled away.

Luella stayed splayed out on the bed, her own chest expanding with quick little huffs of air. Fingers curled around nothing, her hands by her head, and her thighs still slightly parted, falling open in an enticing invitation to the male standing by her bedside like a revenant of the hedonism forced upon her.

Icy blue eyes locked on where her gown fell to her hips, exposing the pale flesh of her legs, all the way to her upper thighs, lingering on the lace of her panties.

She turned her head against the pillows, another silent tear falling from her golden eyes.

At her indecent state, Tharen swallowed heavily. "Fix yourself.”

She sat up, hands shaking so hard they barely supported her as she propped herself up on the mattress. In the absence of him, her whole body quaked.

Listening to his command, Luella righted her gown, tugging it down against her lower thighs. She still felt exposed in the thin slip of her nightgown, so she pulled a blanket up to her chin, covering the rosy flush to her chest and neck, but it did nothing to hide the heat on her cheeks. A blush she knew Tharen could easily see.

The mage adjusted his pants, slung low on his hips. His abs flexed, a faint trail of hair leading from under his belly button. She averted her eyes,

pointedly ignoring his lower half as she trained her gaze on his neck. In her nervousness, she couldn’t bring herself to look at his face.

“Little lamb,” he crooned. His voice was louder now, less shaken and hushed like the distance he had put between them allowed his head to clear. Luella wished she could say the same. “King Vale has called for your presence in the throne room. That’s why I’m here. Get dressed.” He moved to lean back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest.

“Why does the King want to see me?” Luella inquired, scooting to the edge of the bed and standing, keeping a snug hold on the blanket wrapped around her. Tharen laughed as she walked to the wardrobe, the long end of the blanket trailing behind her like a gown. She quickly gathered a day dress from inside, barely paying attention to the color or style in her haste to flee.

She made her way to the bathing chambers, attempting to shut the door and prohibit him from watching her change, but in a flash, he was there, a booted foot notching between the door and the frame before she could close it fully.

“Ah, ah, keep it open,” he ordered, smirk playing along his lips. “The King ordered me to bring you safely to him. What would he do if something were to"—he paused, a threat weighing heavy in his words as he looked her up and down—"happen to you, and I wasn’t there?”

Luella looked up at him in indignation, brows drawing low over her eyes as a scowl formed.

She was certain if something *did* happen to her here, the mage would be to blame.

“F-fine." Her bare feet almost stomped along the floors as she walked to the corner of the bathing chamber, casting a look over her shoulder at Tharen standing in the doorway, blocking out the light from the morning sun that filtered through the glass doors of the balcony.

There were no candles in the bathing chamber—the maids hadn’t made their way in here yet to light them—so it was dim in the room. Her hands reached out in front of her to feel her way around, taking care to not do something as stupid as trip and fall into the bathing pool.

Dropping the blanket, she gave him her back. For all her bravado, she was too nervous to even look at him—content to pretend he was not even there. Especially after he had woken her up the way he did. Her skin was hypersensitive, her body still trembling, all while he was unfazed.

She toyed with the hem of her nightgown, not confident enough to disrobe completely. The gown she had chosen unfolded with a quiet crinkle of fabric as she held it up before her. It was a soft, pale rose color. Almost the same shade as her still-blushing cheeks. The neckline was a soft scoop, and the sleeves puffed in a bell shape. It wasn’t a winter gown; it was made for the warmer months of mid to late spring. She bit her lip. Dare she risk passing by Tharen to retrieve a warmer gown, or should she resign herself to shivering with chill for the rest of the day?

Luella peeked behind her to see Tharen, watching her movements with a feral look on his strong face, a white braid fell over his shoulder as he leaned his side against the doorway, blocking her inside, and his thick tattoos stood stark on his tanned skin. A wild thing. Just like the trio of wolves that seemed to answer to him and him, alone.

She stepped into the gown, pulling it up over her legs to cover her and settle over her hips while her thin slip of a nightgown was still on. Putting her arms in the short sleeves, she already felt goosebumps erupt on her skin from the chill. The laces were undone in the back, and she reached behind her to try and tie them, but it was no use. The strings of the soft lace fell out of her grip, escaping her. Of course, she grabbed not only a gown made for warmer weather but also one with laces in the back instead of in the front, where she could easily reach.

A disgruntled huff fell from her lips as her fingertips met nothing but air. Contorting her body to reach behind her, she finally gave up, hands falling to her sides in exasperation.

"Need help?" Tharen asked from the doorway.

"No," Luella replied, even though she did. But she would never ask for help from the likes of him.

Boots softly padded across the floor of the bathing chamber, lithe and nimble, barely making any noises to alert her to his sudden arrival. Right behind her. Hands brushed over the small of her back, skimming along the light fabric of the rosy gown.

"Won’t you get too cold in this, hm?" he teased. A tug against her waist as he lifted the laces, and in one sharp, swift move, he pulled them taut, forcing a sound from her lips as the bodice of the dress was fixed far too tight against the curve of her waist. His hands worked to expertly do the laces.

Her thoughts couldn’t help but linger on *why* a male like him would be so skilled in tying the laces of a gown.

As though he could read her mind, the mage spoke again, grumbled words shivering over her skin in sinful promise. "I’m far more skilled in taking off gowns, not helping females put them on."

Luella swallowed, a slight shake to her shoulders as she turned to face him and stared up, up, up into those light blue eyes.

She did not thank him, even when he fiddled with the sleeves, making sure they fell over her shoulders right. He tugged on the ends of her hair, gathering the mass of it into one fist as he tucked errant curls behind her arched ears.

All of his movements were jerky like he was forcing himself to be gentle, but it didn’t come across the way he might have intended. She felt the tension in his every touch, saw it in the stiff set of his bare shoulders and the way he constantly swallowed, mouth seemingly parched.

He settled her curls down over one shoulder, fingers lifting away from one at a time—it was almost as if he had to pry his grip away from where his hands were on her slim shoulders.

"Come." Tharen gruffly cleared his throat. "King Vale is waiting."

Tharen escorted Luella inside the opened doors of the throne room with a hand on her lower back.

Her feet shuffled over the long expanse of carpet that led straight to the male lounging on the throne, one leg propped over the other as he lazily waited for her to come before him.

King Vale was dressed in fine black pants, and a worn boot jostled over his knee impatiently. The soles were dirty. Far too dirty for the shoes of a ruler like he. Golden crown perched upon his golden hair, and those serpentine, green eyes tracked her like a predator. A sliver of his tanned chest was exposed from the low dip of his collared, royal blue shirt. And his cape was thrown over his shoulders, pooling around the edges of the throne.

The room was empty, and for that, Luella was grateful.

Tharen’s fingers gripped her waist tightly, signaling her to stop in front of the steps of the raised dais on which the throne sat. King Vale’s many

rings glinted in the light as a perfect, large hand curled around the carved serpents winding around the armrests.

"Princess Luella." The King stood, descending the few steps with graceful ease.

The mage retreated as King Vale came closer, relinquishing his hold on her and giving her away to the King. The absence of his touch against her back pained her more than she would care to admit. She felt bereft without him, mooring her to reality—even if that reality was one she did not wish to live.

"King Vale," Luella whispered, bowing her head in feigned deference.

"Always such a meek thing," the King commented.

There was enough space between them that she did not feel crowded. But that small sense of peace was ripped away as he came closer. Closing in on her and the last few breaths of air that separated them. He was so close that she could smell his scent, wrapping around her like the bejeweled adornments on his fingers. Enticing. It was a smell of burning wood and crackling embers. Woodsy like standing in a forest, but unique enough that it was not just any aroma from roughened bark. It was the distinctive scent of a split-open cedar tree. The reddish pink insides cracked apart to reveal a tang of natural and fresh tones—smokey, but lightly so; musky, but in a soft way.

Luella’s eyes fluttered shut against her will as she breathed it in. She did not look up at him. Too afraid to break the quiet and hesitant revelry that had descended upon the room like a thick blanket. Even Tharen was silent from where he stood behind her.

A long finger notched under her chin, tilting her head up to meet King Vale’s piercing, green eyes. She felt faint from his proximity. It was more intimate than the first time they had been this close. No courtgoers watched on, and with Tharen’s silence, she felt like it was only the two of them—the stolen Princess and the conquerer King.

"Are you afraid, Princess Luella?"

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. Honesty compelled her. He would see through the lies, anyway, so what was the point? "Yes."

King Vale nodded once, the crown upon his golden hair not moving an inch—as if even it was fearful of disobeying the male’s iron will. "You should be, but not of anyone but us. Remember what I decreed. An attack on you is one on me. No one will touch a hair on your pretty little head."

His attention shifted to said hair, and he brushed a golden curl away from her cheek, the touch featherlight. Before she could ask his meaning, he carried on. "You will start attending court gatherings. You’re to spend your days here in Serpentis as one of my war spoils." His lips quirked up. "I do so wish to flaunt you to the masses. It is an honor. You’re the only living, breathing trophy I possess, Princess Luella, and I treat my possessions with care. Most of them, anyway." The last part was tacked on like an afterthought.

Attend court?

Luella had heard tales of the type of court the shifters held—and none were made for a fae heirus.

"If you treat your possessions well, why did you throw me in the dungeons and discard me?" The question fell from her lips, unbidden, and she lowered her gaze, training her attention on King Vale’s feet. He held firm to her chin, not releasing her, but she did not want to give him the power of having eye contact. Little rebellions.

"To break some of that fire, but I see it wasn’t as successful as I had been hoping." The King gripped her face even tighter. So tight she feared he would leave finger-shaped bruises on her delicate skin. "Look at me when I speak to you, Princess Luella," he ordered.

She slowly lifted her gaze, arrested by his eyes, held captive in his orbit.

Luella wanted to open her mouth and reply. To let him know just how successful it would have been—if not for her demon cellmate. His plans had been thwarted, if ever so slightly. She could not imagine how broken she would be if not for Az. A soft, rueful smile stretched her lips, and she bit her tongue.

The King didn’t need to know that she awoke disoriented in her lush bed, dreaming of the soft drip of water falling to a puddle on a stone floor. Or devoured every morsel of food placed in front of her, in fear her next meal would be taken.

The only thing good to come out of her stint in the dungeons was the one who haunted her every thought—both waking and sleeping. Luella had not once forgotten the soft-hearted demon who vowed to protect her with a binding oath forged in blood he willingly bled and words he willingly spoke.

But still, Luella feared she would never be the same again.

Not after everything.

"Why do you call me by my title? Solis is—" A sob bubbled up; she cleared her throat. There was no space for weakness here. "Solis is no more. I am no longer Princess Luella."

King Vale hummed. "You are still the Princess, though, are you not? To some, at least. If your kingdom is laid to waste and its subjects under new rule, there are still those who dare to dream. Dare to hope." He lowered his face to hers, whispering over her cheek, "And dreams and hopes, Princess Luella, are very dangerous things." King Vale stepped back, removing his hand from where it had been gripping her chin. "Even I cannot demolish a birthright."

There was something to his words. Something that spoke of *more*, lingering unsaid. Something the King did not wish to outright express, only coyly hint at, leaving a trail of clues for her to follow if only she dared.

King Vale looked to Tharen. "Take her back to her room for the day." And then, he turned his attention back to her. "Rest up. You will need it. The night will be long. Best be prepared and fresh-minded." Ascending the few steps of his throne, he kept her in his sights, never turning his back on her.

The King sat, sweeping his cape behind him as he did so, reclining on his golden throne and regarding her with interest and barely contained amusement. As if she were a mere plaything.

"Tonight, Princess Luella, you will see just how the citizens of Serpentis revel."

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PREPARATIONS (TIED UP)

Her bare skin pebbled in the damp chill of the room.

Osa vigorously scrubbed Luella's back with a rough towel coated in lavender-scented suds—the very same soapy foam that clouded the water of the bathing pools she was currently in. She leaned forward, hands scooping foamy bubbles and skimming along the tops of the water, gathering them to her chest to cover where her breasts peeked out of the water, ripples of blue cascading over her bare skin and hinting at the rosy flush from the warmth, traveling all the way down her stomach and to her thighs and legs.

The silent maid, Ina, held out a hand, scales glinting on her thin cheeks as she silently instructed Luella to lift one of her legs from the water so she could wash it.

Carefully lifting her right leg—thighs squeezed firmly shut to preserve a hint of modesty from the small spaces where the bubbles and white foam dissipated—Luella shivered from Ina's gentle touch. Soap was lathered over her calves, the cloth making soothing, circular strokes down to her ankles and over her feet, between her toes.

She flushed a deeper scarlet at the touch against her toes. Toes that Tharen had spoken of owning. As if it were an honor to own her. She could still feel his touch on her, still feel phantom zings of pleasure throughout her body from where she had pressed along his thick, muscled thigh.

Osa started washing her hair, fingernails scratching along her scalp. "Close your eyes," she all but barked.

Luella obeyed, eyes drifting shut as Osa forced her head to tilt back, cool water pouring over her scalp, rinsing the last of the soaps from her wet hair. The female sat down the empty water cup, wringing out a cloth and laying it out to dry over a gilded towel rack. She urged Luella to stand, and Ina silently held out a fluffy towel for her to step into and wrapped it around her wet shoulders. Luella’s finger curled in the softness of the towel, knuckles white as she held it to her chest, a foot lifted as she stepped up out of the pool, allowing herself to be plucked and prodded and made into a perfect little trophy by the two maids.

Her hair was dried and styled into a half-up-do, a few pieces of the hair around her face woven into silky braids, showcasing her arched ears, and clipped back with a golden hair ornament of a serpent twining around a horizontal rose stem.

She turned her head, watching her reflection in the mirror before her, inwardly seething at the sight of the gilded serpent in her hair. Another piece of her, made to be owned by someone else. Another piece taken.

Ina dusted scant face paint on her—a light line of kohl along her lashes and the barest covering of rouge along her cheeks and lips—before urging her to stand.

The whole affair was quiet. And Luella was too riddled with nerves over what she was getting ready to face to voice the questions welling within her.

Court loomed. The captive Princess, forced into a den of dragons and serpents. Much like the little lamb Tharen called her, in their lair, she would be inconsequential prey. They could take her and kill her with a mere thought.

Luella’s throat closed up.

The two females dressed her, not taking their time, but not too swift, either. It was obvious Ina and Osa were following a schedule. All so whoever was charged with coming to get her could lead her into King Vale’s midst and the preying mass of fire-breathers.

The dress was…

She grimaced.

Scant, pale blue fabric, with a plunging neckline so low it dipped almost to her stomach. Her heartbeat was so fast it fluttered the skin above her navel, a spot just waiting to be taken and devoured. Twin slits up either

thigh were cut to her hips, with a small piece of fluttering fabric between her legs to preserve at least some modesty. She knew there was an undergarment covering her, but with the way the dress was cut, it still didn’t leave much to the imagination; she might not have been wearing anything under it at all. The sleeves were small straps, and Luella shivered with waves of cold in the room and nerves. She had never exposed so much skin before. Felt far too vulnerable for what awaited her. The shoes were thin slippers, and ribbons of blue wrapped around her calves, exposed with every step from the slits in the gown.

Ina gave her a soft, encouraging smile, scales glinting along her cheekbones as she packed up. Osa’s hair caught the warmth from the candlelight as she headed for the door, the female looking Luella over with poorly concealed disgust.

"Pretty things never last long here. The King will grow tired of you eventually, fae bitch. Those of shadows or sun never did play well with serpents," she quietly seethed, shooting poison-filled daggers with her eyes, red hair swooshing over her shoulders as she left.

Luella staggered back, corners of her painted lips tugging down in a frown from the words. She never thought of Osa as a friend, knew her to be scathing, even, but the words cut deep. The last line lingered, etching a furrow into her brow: *shadow or sun?*

Solis was the sun, but what was the shadow?

Luella sighed, the sound echoing on the heels of the soft snick of the door shutting as the maids left.

And now, she must wait for someone to fetch her. In her feared anticipatory state, she was almost tempted to place a bet with herself on who it would be this time.

Silent Graves? Untamed Tharen? Sinful Bastian?

It certainly wouldn’t be King Vale.

She hoped it would be Bastian—or even Graves would be better than Tharen. The mage unsettled Luella. He was too wild. Too unpredictable. At least Graves’s silence was a surety, and Bastian’s protection made her weakened toward him.

A weakness that he could never find out about, or else Luella feared he would use it for personal gain—prey on that weakness, lean into it, making her all but putty under his sensual and cold touch.

The door to her room creaked open; whoever it was didn’t even bother to knock.

Graves entered silently, dressed in finery. The finest she had ever seen him. But that finery was cut with a lecherous, secretive edge. His grey shirt was form-fitting, sleeves lined with laces done up from his wrists to his shoulders, where they puffed slightly at the wrists and kept close to his skin with little hooks secured around his fingers. The collar was low, so low it might have shown his navel if the laces weren’t tied so tightly. He wore the same amulet she had noticed earlier, the purple stone almost pulsating in the dim of the early night. The pants were high-waisted and fit with a thick buckle; chains of woven gold were secured to his hip and fell to the side, matching the gold-tipped boots he wore.

Her eyes tracked up to his face.

As usual, Graves’s head was covered, but not with his normal dark hood and cowl. This eve, the male wore a gorgeous piece of silk that acted as a cowl, pulled over the lower portion of his face and obscuring his features entirely. His head was shielded by a thick, black hood, the edges lined with gold. Eyes of lapis lazuli stood out from the shadowed recesses of his garb.

Sinful.

Yet still as untouchable and enigmatic as ever.

She didn’t understand why he covered himself. It surely had to be more than mere shame over his scar. She didn’t think the male to be so vain.

No. This was more than a matter of vanity and appearances.

Secrets clung to this male, and he seemed so untouchable standing there that Luella took a step back, unbidden.

Graves took her in with the same intensity in which she did him, deep blue eyes roving over every inch of her, from her red cheeks—reddened from more than just the rouge—to her slippers, the laces that crawled up her calves. The exposed cut of her gown bore almost everything to him.

Steeling herself, she took a hesitant step forward to his awaiting palm. His cunning eyes shifted along her legs, the faint breeze in the room causing the fluttering fabric to sweep to the side, showcasing the long expanse of her legs, all the way to a spot high on her hips. Attention snagging on the fabric, he waited like the patient watcher he had proven himself to be—focus on the thin strip of material between her legs, covering the apex of her thighs, where she felt a strange sense of awareness.

"King Vale sent me to retrieve you," Graves announced, voice scratchy with disuse.

Her breath hitched as she placed her hand in his. He wrapped his fingers around her flushed skin, thumb pressing into the pulse point below her thumb, where her heart pounded with nerves.

"Very well," Luella breathed. "Let’s get on with it."

"Not so fast." Graves tsked, quickly grabbing her other wrist and switching his hold on both of them to one hand. With his free hand, he pulled something from his pocket.

Not just anything, but a long chain. Golden. Similar to the chains on his hip. He looped the cool chain around her right wrist, and as soon as it was secured, it glowed a faint yellow, similar to sunshine. It warmed her skin but did not burn. Not as she thought it might.

"What did you do to me?" she asked, watching as he moved to secure the free end to the chains along his belt.

"Order of the King. For your protection."

She gave a tug on the chain; the length was long enough that she could stand and not feel crowded by him but short enough that she was forced to where he could reach out and touch her with ease. "For my protection, or so I won’t flee?"

Graves released the chain, the length falling between them and striking his thigh was a soft clink as it hit the collection of swooping chains adorned to his belt—more than just mere decoration, she realized, but there for a purpose, to keep her tethered to him.

"You won’t flee," he commented. He started for the door, and Luella was forced to follow, the thin soles of her slippers padding along the floor as she tripped after him. She wanted to ask him how he was so sure she would not try to escape, but before she could, he spoke again: "The chains were another gift from Bastian. Tharen wanted to use less than pleasant means of keeping you tied to us, but Bastian proposed something a bit more agreeable. You should thank him."

"I will do no such thing."

"You should also be thanking me." He barreled on as if she had never even said anything. "I volunteered to oversee you tonight. It could have been Tharen. He certainly tried to get his hands on you."

He was talking more tonight than she had ever heard. She wondered why he was being so forthcoming. Almost as if he were addled by the

prospect of her entering the dragon's lair. But it couldn't possibly be. For him to be addled would mean he cared—and he most definitely did not care about *her*.

Luella tripped along after him, her free hand securing the pieces of fabric of her gown together so she wouldn't flash more skin in her stumbling haste. With his height and size, Graves's strides were long, and she struggled to keep up.

They finally arrived at the doors to the throne room. From within, a manner of sounds emitted. Calls, cheers, and raucous laughter, accompanied by the faint, mellow sound of a harp. Her palms grew clammy with sweat as Graves nodded to the two soldiers posted on either side of the doors, in an order to open.

Graves led the way inside, not giving one moment of pause as Luella was thrust into the pit of predators.

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DANCING AMID SIN

A trio of bodies writhed on a red velvet settee.

Two females, in various states of undress, anchored on either side of some red-haired male, his face obscured from sight and his hands wrapped tightly around each of the female's shoulders. The one on the right—a raven-haired, willowy female whose dress was hanging off of one shoulder, nearly exposing the entirety of her chest—trailed her hand along his abdomen before snaking it under the waistband of his breeches, while the female on his left stroked along his torso with claw-tipped, black nails.

Cheeks flaming, Luella choked on a gasp and looked away from the sight, only to meet familiar eyes already trained on her, belonging to another male lounging on the same settee.

Bastian reclined on the outer reaches, not quite *with* the trio but obviously watching. The laces of his black and red blouse were undone wantonly, as one of his arms stretched out on the back of the chair, the very tips of his fingers brushing against the male's red hair.

The chain keeping Luella tied to Graves grew taut as she stumbled to a stop, digging her heels into the ground to stop herself from being pulled forward. If she were to look down at the low cut of her gown, would her heart be visibly pounding against the cage of her ribs? In this den of beasts, shifters, and wild things, their hearing would be able to pick up on every little hitch in her breath, every cadence of her heart.

Curious heads turned toward her as the chatter grew dim. The harpist continued playing a haunting melody, echoed with a soft symphony of sin from the violinist—a female with hair the shade of lavender flowers who wore a gown of completely see-through mesh, wrapping around her curves and ending at her mid-thigh, feeding into her pulchritudinous persona.

The trio on the settee disentangled, one of the females slowly drew her hand from the male's pants, cutting a red slash through his chest as she roughly cut the tip of her nail into the sweat-slicked muscles of his tanned skin. Her raven hair fell over her bare shoulder as she reclined on his shoulder, eyes roving over every inch of Luella's skin. A red tongue flicked out, the end forked, as she licked over her equally red lips.

Depravity made the trio's eyes half-lidded, looking as though they wanted to devour Luella where she stood; a shiver wracked through her, and she tore her gaze away, undone by the overt display of desire.

A tug on the chain, her wrist aching from the harshness…

"Come," Graves ordered impatiently, beckoning her onward with the golden chain, his fist clenched as he tugged.

Stupified, Luella followed Graves. The male wove through the room, forcing her to hurry lest she fell and be dragged behind him. The notion made anger spark inside her gut.

The room appeared wholly different than the time she had first seen it. The throne at the far end was illuminated with moonlight filtering in through the glass dome above. The seat was empty, with no sign of King Vale. Lounge areas had been added, as well as little tables clustered around the outskirts of the wide open space in the middle, filled with dancing bodies, all with skin gleaming with sweat and glittering dust. The ornate chandelier above held many flickering candles, enchanted to burn bright and hot, and flecks of shimmery sparkles fell from the embers, coating the floor of the room—and the occupants—with a thin layer of iridescent dust.

She held out her free hand as she walked, some of the dust collecting in her palm. A light coating of the shimmers dusted her upturned palm, making her look glistening with sweat just like the others, as though she had been partaking in the many… vigorous activities going on in the dimly lit alcoves of the room. The blush upon her cheeks was ever-present, and she feared it wouldn't leave her all evening—not with the unconcealed eroticism within the room. The air was thick with concupiscence.

Bodies danced and reveled in all the lechery that could only be found in such a serpentine den. The occasional wolf shifter passed by, and they were even more salacious than the serpents—feral and wild, teeth gnashing in their haste to devour lips and skin, clawing marks into unclothed backs, and wantonly prancing about the room, eyes gleaming as they looked for a new toy to play with.

And it seemed that Luella was that toy.

As Graves led her to a small—and thankfully empty—alcove filled with a little table holding a burning candle and a few half-empty wine glasses, she felt the burn of eyes tracking her every step. Nostrils flared as heads turned to follow after her.

Luella’s hands trembled as she sat in one of the high-backed seats, and she huffed as she fell back into the deepness of the plush chair, her gown almost parting and exposing the junction of her thighs. She tucked her hands under her legs to stop her shaking, not able to meet the raven shifter’s stare as she shifted on the seat, righting her gown to drape over her legs. The delicate links of the chain clinked from her soft movements, a little tug on her wrist as Graves sat down next to her, body pulsing with warmth as he moved his chair flush against hers.

The male leaned closer, his breath tickling her ear. "You do not have to stay long. Just enough to appease the King and these hungered beasts."

She suppressed a shiver, nodding absently. Far too preoccupied with the shifters she could see in the wide space of the throne room, casting glances at where she was partially hidden in the alcove. Her eyes wandered to Bastian, who was smoking something that looked like a cigar. He tilted his head back, eyes half-lidded as he puffed smoke rings of deep maroon.

"Where is the King?" she asked, just barely managing to quell the quiver in her voice from giving away her anxiety.

"With the Prima. They’ll be here shortly." Graves beckoned for a passing servant and plucked two glasses filled with purple swirls of liquid from the silver tray before the servant scampered off. Graves gripped Luella’s wrist, tugging it from where it had been tucked under her thigh. She tore her gaze from Bastian, watching Graves as he pressed the stem of the wine glass into her hands, forcing her fingers to curl around it. "Drink up. You’ll need the courage." His words were a mumble around the lip of his glass as he took a sip.

Peeking at Graves from the corner of her lashes as she lifted the glass to her lips, she took a hesitant sip, mouth dry with fear. The wine was rich and fruity. Her muscles loosened from the thick sweetness of the liquid. Potent, as it flowed through her and warmed her veins; her head buzzed.

This is stronger than I'm used to, Luella thought. *Better not indulge.*

Sitting the glass down on the white, cloth-covered table, she pushed it away with the tip of her finger. Would be having no more of that—she couldn't let her guard down here.

At the far corner of the room, in shadowed alcoves just like the one she and Graves sat, there were flashes of flesh and wicked scenery. Faint moans of pleasure rippled behind mesh curtains and darkened corners.

A female was kneeling in between a male's spread legs, and… Luella's throat closed up.

The male's head was tilted back against the wall, mouth open with pleasure as the female between his thighs *moved*. Doing whatever it was that she did, the male clearly enjoyed it. Beside the pair, as if they didn't even care about the show they were giving the room, were many more displays of wickedness. Heavy stares and heated touches; rumpled gowns and corsets, and bare chests and thick muscles.

Luella flushed a deep scarlet. The glass of wine beckoned, and before she could think better of it, she reached out with a slightly shaking hand and gripped the cool glass of the stem. She took a small sip, letting the heady liquid flow through her. It was a bad idea. Already far stronger than the diluted fae wine she was used to.

And as Graves watched her drink, Luella could only feel she was doing exactly as he wished. The fingers of her other hand curled into her thighs as she stifled a soft gasp, pulling the lip of the glass away from her mouth and setting it back on the table. The chains clinked, and an intoxicated flush painted her skin at the reminder he had volunteered to *oversee* her this night.

She shifted her gaze back to the expanse of the revelers, the wine working to dull her shock.

The room was a pleasure hall and smoking den, wrapped into one. A place of the worst of nightmares and best of daydreams. Effervescent revelers, beckoning with sinful hands, only to lure unsuspecting souls into their trap with promises they could not keep.

Over the shimmering dust and plumes of smoke wafting from cigars, her sight quickly became clouded with the haze of it all. It felt like she was in a dream, her limbs awkward and ungainly, and her head high above, like her thoughts were mingling with the flickering flames of the chandelier and not below perched upon her shoulders as it should be.

It was disconcerting.

Something about this place… The very air seemed enchanted.

Or maybe that was the wine.

The fog that had settled around her mind was disrupted by the heavy thump of someone sitting down on her other side. Luella jerked, limbs clumsy and head featherlight as she turned to see who the newcomer was.

The King’s Advisor reclined on the chair next to Luella with ease, legs outstretched and arms locked behind his head like time answered to him. A black cigar dangled from his sinfully swollen lips, and he cocked a dark brow at Luella as he peered at her from the corner of his red-tinted eyes.

"Having fun?" Bastian mumbled around the cigar, unlocking his fingers from behind his hand to take a long drag, plumes of berry-scented smoke from the Rys in his pipe drifting from his lips as he pulled it away, head tilting back to bare his long, unnaturally pale neck as he exhaled. He snuffed the end of the cigar out on the table, uncaring that it left a dusting of grey ash on the surface. The drug he indulged in made his pupils blown wide, coating his usual bergamot scent in the alluring tang of heady berries.

Needing a distraction, Luella lifted the wine glass, taking a much smaller sip this time, before replying, "The most fun I’ve ever had in my life." Her tone lacked the amusement she tried to infuse into her words. Instead of sounding coy, she merely sounded dazed. At least her slight feared stutter was gone. "And you? It looked like you were having plenty of fun." The wine had loosened her lips. She never would have said something so bold without being intoxicated.

Graves grew stiff beside her. The chains keeping her tied to him gave a soft clang, tickling her flesh. His palm felt scorchingly hot against her skin —bare, from the way her dress had fallen to the side, exposing her whole leg, but she didn’t have it in her to care right now. She was entirely too focused on the feel of his callused palm against her inner thigh. His thumb rubbed softly like he wasn’t aware he was even doing it.

"Is that jealousy I hear, pet?"

"N-no," she scoffed, indignant. Under their pressing stares, the stutter was back. Taking another swallow of wine, her lips tingled and throat bobbed in her haste to drink.

But the glass was taken from her before she could finish it. A thin trickle of purple liquid escaped from her rouged lips as Graves plucked the glass from her mid-sip.

She glowered, missing how the raven shifter’s keen eyes tracked the droplets as they fell over her bottom lip and down her chin. Missed how he and Bastian both grew silent as she collected it with her thumb and then put it between her lips and sucked away the scant amount of wine droplets. Sugary sweet. Tasted even better when warmed from skin instead of a cold glass.

Bastian reached over her to grab the stolen, half-empty glass from Graves’s hands, tongue licking over the rim before he downed the rest in one go.

"Judgement, then?" the vampire inquired.

Graves’s thumb stilled on her thigh, his grip turning bruising as he awaited her response.

She couldn’t respond truthfully to that, not if she wanted to leave here alive. She knew Bastian wouldn’t hurt her, but still, she didn’t want to chance it.

So, she kept quiet, fingertips tapping along the top of the table since she had nothing else to occupy her hands with now that her wine was gone. It was doubtful she would be granted another glass.

Bastian leaned forward, bracing his hand on her other thigh. She was caged in between both of them.

A vampire and a raven, taking their time as they toyed with the little Princess.

"I don’t discriminate, pet. All blood flows the same delicious red." Bastian whispered the words over the side of her cheek, unnaturally cool breaths puffing over her flushed skin and dancing along her neck as he lowered his nose to trace along the veins there. Not touching her but a mere breath away. In threat.

A reminder that he could easily pierce her flesh and take what he desired if he only so wished it. And she would have no chance.

The seductive moment was broken by the room growing so silent that she could hear her own rattled, quick breaths and the pounding of her heart.

It was an unnatural hush—even more so than when she had been forced into the room by Graves.

A quiet that signaled the arrival of an apex predator.

It reminded her of how the bugs and little chittering creatures in the gardens on the outskirts of the ruins of Solis would grow utterly silent when a fox would prowl about.

Partiers set down their glasses of sweet purple wine or bitter amber vials of hard liquor. Smoke still wafted from pipes and cigars. However, those who were partaking in the more scandalous activities paused, mouths sticky and rouge smudged, clothing askew, and some almost completely undressed, uncaring.

The King of Serpentis strode into the throne room in a whirlwind of his telltale cape, his golden crown perched upon his head glinting under the candlelight—these two pieces were the most distinguished of his garb. Save for the crown and the cape, King Vale could have been any lecherous reveler. His pants were low-strung, and his silken shirt completely unbuttoned, baring a gleaming tanned chest with so many muscles, Luella felt faint from the sight. The fine sparkling dust that fell from the chandelier above almost immediately coated his tanned skin, giving it a gleam of iridescence that only fed into his otherwordly presence and wild regality. The sparkles caught the gems of his crown, making the shimmers even brighter, calling to attention the undoubted physical evidence of his rule.

The Prima was on his heels, sans shirt, of course. With a bare, gleaming chest and billowy pants—his hair was free, Luella noted, save for two braids woven throughout his white strands, little clinking gold threads intertwined—the mage appeared the feral thing she knew him to be. The trio of wolves were not here. Luella was glad; the beasts unnerved her.

King Vale immediately found where she was tucked between Graves and Bastian, and she swore the green in his eyes grew more vibrant when that unwavering stare fell on her. He didn’t look away from her once, even as he ascended the few steps to his throne, taking a seat with the utmost grace. Tharen stood beside him, thick, veined arms crossed over his chest as he looked out of the teaming mass of revelers. His thick brow was drawn low, eyes sharp, and jaw set.

The mage appeared to be upset over something. He, too, soon found Luella’s gaze, icy blue meeting her bright gold. The difference was almost imperceptible, but the hardness of his features softened. It started off small,

so minute she almost would have missed it if she weren't paying such close attention to him. The way the tension seeped out of his rigid shoulders, the crease between his brows smoothing out, and the tick in his jaw easing.

King Vale leaned over the arm of the throne, fingers gripping the head of the snake carved into the surface as he silently called for Tharen's attention. The pair looked toward her, and Luella felt a tiny noise of fear escape from her lips. A smirk curved into Tharen's mouth—she knew he heard the noise. As a mage, his hearing was excellent.

Graves's grip on her thigh grew unrelenting, and her shoulders caved forward as she made herself smaller. Tharen nodded before striding across the room to where she sat nestled in the alcove. The mage came to an abrupt stop right before her, giving the males on either side of her a cursory glance.

"The King requests your presence," the Prima said, gesturing for Luella to stand. She did so with hesitance, looking to Graves, then Bastian, as if asking for help. But she did not receive any from either of them—merely a quiet nod from the vampire and nothing from the raven shifter, just those keen eyes that never strayed far from her.

"What about…" She held up her wrist, the golden chain shimmering under the sparking embers and fluttering dust from the candlelight.

Graves unclipped the end from his belt and passed it off to Tharen, all without standing. The mage tightly wound the loose end of the chain around his knuckles, pulling Luella flush to his side, reeling her into the heat of his imposing presence. The skin of his chest was damp with sweat and smelled sweet and enticing. Snow melting under a summer sun. Her bare shoulder brushed along the taut muscles of his stomach, and he shuddered. She jolted back as far as she could go, but Tharen jerked on the chain, keeping her snug to his side.

She bit back her protests, Bastian calling out a sharp, "Watch her," as Tharen led her across the room.

The revelers parted, giving them a wide berth. Those who dared to come closer were warned away with low growls, and the threat of Tharen's free hand on the dagger fastened to his hip—Luella had almost missed it, with how her attention had been on his chest. But the weapon did not stop their words. The leers and vulgar words thrown her way.

The area before the throne was clear, like an invisible force around it kept it safe from wanton revelers and preying shifters. King Vale tracked

her every movement as Tharen led her closer, depositing her right in front of the steps before the throne.

Stumbling to a stop, Tharen jerked on the chain, making her wobble, and she barely caught herself before she fell to the hard ground. King Vale looked down at her, features sparking in amusement at her almost tumble.

“You must kneel when called to the throne, Luella," King Vale ordered. He rested his chin on his palm, elbow braced on the arm of the throne. Rubbing his jaw, he waited for her to obey.

“W-what happened to… princess?” Luella managed to ask, jaw grinding at the prospect of showing obedience to this male—to kneeling in front of all of these watchers. Just like the first time she had been forced into the throne room. The eyes behind her burned, and her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. The hazed confidence the few sips of heady wine had given her had all but evaporated.

“Here, you are Luella, and I am your King and master. Do not test me. Kneel.” His words were clipped, patience worn thin, and she hadn’t even done anything yet.

Tharen jerked downward on his end of the chain, forcing her to stumble once more. This time, she didn’t catch herself, knees roughly hitting the stone of the marble floor. She clenched her jaw, refusing to show how the thud made her kneecaps ache. The mage loosened his hold on the chain, allowing her enough slack to kneel comfortably at the King’s feet, leaving Tharen to hover at her back.

At her subservient position before the throne, King Vale appeared pleased, some of the anger and impatience melting away. Even if the choice to kneel was robbed from her, the action still seemed to please him. He was not above forcing her to achieve his desired outcome. She knew this, just as she knew the sky was blue and fire was warm, and yet, it made frustrated tears prick behind her lids.

King Vale stood, descending the few steps between them before coming to a stop right before her. Breath catching in her throat, her face was level with his crotch. She was so close she could see the faint shimmer of the dust on his tanned lower stomach and the faint trail of hair that disappeared down the waistband of his pants—pants that were so low-strung, the V-cut of his lower abdomen was prominent, a sharp line of defined muscles that she had the impulse to trace with her hands—

No.

She couldn’t feel this way.

Not for her enemy. For the male who killed her parents and destroyed her kingdom.

She would not feel desire for him. The bodies of the Solis fae had not even had time to turn to ash, and she already was being swayed to the ways of her captors—by appearances. But appearances were deceiving, she knew this well. It was the prettiest things that were the most deadly.

The King would not make for a pleasant lover, not with his history as a raging murderer. His lovers most likely didn’t leave his bed chambers in one piece.

King Vale, unbeknownst to her internal struggles, extended a hand. “Dance with me.”

Luella placed her hand in his. His grip was warm and firm as his fingers wrapped around her palm. Sparks ignited between them where their skin touched—that familiar zap of tingling nerves that shot up her wrist and to her elbow. King Vale gripped her tighter, pulling her to her feet with a flourish.

Did he feel it, too?

The chain keeping her tied to Tharen stretched as King Vale pulled her further into him. The King held out a hand, not breaking eye contact with her as he silently ordered the mage to hand over the end of the chain.

Luella was mesmerized by his green eyes. His pupils weren’t as serpentine as the snake shifters but more subtle, like the eyes of all dragon shifters. It was a deadly gaze, arresting her with promises of danger and the lurking scales of a fire-breathing beast.

She distantly noted Tharen handing off the golden chain to him. The King wrapped it loosely around his hand, the golden links falling between their closely held bodies like delicate threads.

The Prima fell back, disappearing somewhere into the crowd of revelers. The bodies had grown thicker with every passing moment, the heavy cover of night filtering in through the skylight, the moon high above, with no speck of brightness to be found—in darkness, the serpents shed their skin and let their true natures out to run rampant. Thriving in chaos and sin and revelrous depravity.

King Vale led Luella into the mass of swirling bodies, parting with ease for their King as he ventured into the depths of the crowd. At the side of the room, the musician’s song ended with a wretched screech of the violin, the

harp playing in tune with light plucks, offsetting the sorrowful harshness of the ending notes emitting from the violin.

Her slippered feet brushed along the dance floor, tracking through the dusting of sparkles, and she came to a stop before the King in the very center of the room. The chain was a living thing between them, pulsing with interest and carefully concealed desires. It burned the flesh of her wrist, and the King’s knuckles grew white from his tense grip on the end of it. A dry swallow made a cough threaten to bubble over her rouged lips, but she averted her gaze to the floor, biting her lip so hard iron exploded on her tongue from the split flesh.

King Vale’s nostrils flared, thin streams of smoke wafting between them as he scented her blood. "Watch yourself."

It was a harsh command, and though the words seemed to be wrapped with care, she knew his reasoning was anything but altruistic.

Luella did not respond, all her attention was on the way the golden links of the chain wrapped around her wrist, her skin beginning to take on an irritated, red tinge from the rubbing on her tender flesh, the way the links stretched to the King, keeping her wholly at his mercy. His tanned fingers adorned with rings gripping the end of the chain so tightly, she wondered if it would snap under his punishing grip…

The King notched a hot finger under her chin, tilting her head up to meet his eyes. His touch was unyielding, his hand so large it nearly encompassed the area of her whole face. Deft fingers, no scars. But a tiny bit of roughness brushed against her skin—a callus on the pad of his fingertips.

He searched her eyes like he was searching for the very answers to the universe, itself.

The air was still, yet charged with heat and smoke and a cloud of debauchery. Expectant, he lifted their joined hands to place one of hers on his shoulder; the other, he grasped firmly by their side and did not let go. Her touch was hesitant; the feel of his strong shoulder and tense muscles made her palms sweat. King Vale wrapped his entire arm around Luella’s waist, pulling her flush to his chest.

"You’re enjoying this," she breathed.

King Vale smirked. "And if I am?"

"Well, then, I would be remiss to tell you that I am not."

"I think you are. You just don’t know it yet, Luella." He said her name like a promise. A promise that entailed the gods knew what.

The orchestra started up a new tune. A song that was haunting and melodic. It called her to flee and never look back, yet urged her to stay put and see where the night may lead.

And they began…

King Vale swept her around the room without missing a beat or a step. His steps were light and sure as he led Luella with graceful poise, and she followed his every move—not because she wished to, but because she had no choice. Every swirl and every step, she allowed her body to bend and twirl to his will as if she were an instrument he was playing to perfection.

Etching patterns into the sparkling dust coating the floor, her slippered feet tracked every move they made. Sweeping brushes against marbled white and soft, hesitant footfalls into the dusting of glitter.

Those around danced and reveled, but their eyes stayed stuck on the King and his captive twirling in their midst, unable to keep their eyes off such a sight. She ignored them all, held captive in more than just body alone as the King did not ease up on his staring, keeping her ensnared, trapped. A spider caught in a web. Her lips parted, toes pointing in her slipper as a foot arced out behind her in a graceful trail of decadence.

Two bodies, twirling and spinning. Twin heads of golden hair, coifed to perfection. He was all hard and strong, where she was soft and feminine. He was indestructible and powerful, and she was breakable and delicate, like the petals of a flower withstanding the harshest of rainstorms. The dichotomy of their being made her whole body feel hot.

“You’re a rather good dancer," King Vale commented.

“Dancing was one of my daily lessons, along with the other arts." Luella grew abashed at the compliment. Instead of looking at his face, she focused on the way he led her about the room, watching his feet mark a path for her.

“What else did your tutors teach you?” The King skimmed his hand along her back, fingers stretching as his hold on her grew fierce, leading her to a soft whirl around the room, her golden hair fluttering behind her, and the chain between them spinning out, before hitting against the bare skin of her thigh.

“Much," she replied, near breathless from the pace of their dance, how he felt against her, how his strong arms held her and dipped her and spun her with practice. But the line of the King’s questioning confused her. Her

attention fell on the skin of his chest, that dip of his shirt where the silken fabric parted. "The arts, like I said, as well as history, geography, maths. Arcane sciences and elemental magics. Etiquette..." Luella trailed off, glancing up at him and noting how he still hadn't looked away from her.

"A proper syllabus for the locked-away Princess." King Vale sighed, the sound bitter. "Enough to keep you pliant and well-mannered, but not enough to make you knowledgeable in all the ways of politics and war. The ways that matter."

"N-no," she managed under his intense stare. "My tutors, they taught me of w-war. I know all about it. But I wouldn't need lessons to know of how cruel and wicked your kind are." She resented how she stumbled over her words in her fear.

Luella's blood boiled. For this male to belittle her so… That pit of emptiness within her thrummed.

King Vale's grip tightened on her waist, fingers curling around the small expanse of it, even while he barked a short laugh, the sound drawing the attention of the dancing couples around them—giving them a far enough berth to speak of their fear of their King, but close enough she felt like a specimen under their curious eyes.

"My kind? You haven't known wickedness or cruelty, Luella, not yet. And you should hope you never do."

"I'm your captive. Isn't that evidence of your cruelty? Do not make light of my trials, King Vale." She said his name with as much detachment as he did hers, with little regard to the title.

Luella rose on her tiptoes, nose pressing under his chin from the added height as she peered up at him. Her chin jutted out with defiance and feigned arrogance as she faced off this predator. Maybe it was the stares from the revelers around them, or Bastian sitting in the alcove, watching her without fail—Tharen and Graves beside the vampire, meeting Luella's eyes with every turn along the floor—but she felt safer here than if she were to have been alone with the King.

Maybe it was a fool's thought.

Enchanted dust fell from the flickering candles on the chandelier above, swaths of iridescence coating his tanned skin and golden hair. Shining like a jewel.

A pink tongue poked out to lick along her red bottom lip, and he tracked the movement. Everything was so hot and thick and real. She *burned*.

Black lashes fanned against his cheeks. Drops of sparkles clung to the corners, making it look like he was crying tears of gold and silver. Luella wondered what she looked like in this enchanted place. Could enchantments turn her into something to be desired?

From the way everyone watched her, she wondered if she was as alluring as this male before her.

“Evidence of my cruelty? Or evidence of my kindness?" The King stared down at her with the weight of a thousand unsaid things hanging between them, laced between his words, and she was undone.

King Vale placed a hand on her shoulder and forced her back down, away from his face, her slippered soles flattening as he suddenly spun her out. Her curls, shimmering with sparkles, flowed from her cheeks at the movement; the sides of her dress fluttered, and she felt a whisper of cool air hit her upper thighs. Fingertips trailed down her arm, interlocking with hers, the only spot they were connected, before she was gracefully spun back into his orbit, King Vale pulling her into him with a satisfactory glint in his green eyes.

Luella was out of breath from the movement, from being the sole object of his attention. Her chest pressed against his, and the music swelled, a resounding symphony as they crashed together, the precipice of their dance. The crescendo of sound tapered off like the sparks of glittering embers that drifted around them, falling to the floor and the exposed skin and clothes of the revelers in their midst.

A strong hand on the small of her back, the other holding her side, and Luella was dipped to the ground, her back arched as she allowed herself to be lowered, bent over King Vale’s unbending arm. He was so strong, his touch so sure, that she knew he would not let her fall.

The movement was like breathing to her, as easy as the flutter of her lids as she blinked or the way that magicless pit in her cried out when she dwelled on the emptiness for too long… Her head fell back, the ends of her curls brushing along the dusted floor. Neck tilted, exposing the lithe, pale expanse of unmarked skin. Her chest rose and fell rapidly from the exposed position. But she would not falter. Would not allow him to make her scared.

In this den of dragons and serpents, she must stay poised to have the upper hand. One scent of fear, and that’s when those hungry maws would open, snapping her up before her next heartbeat.

The music drifted off into the final notes. One last, long string of the harp resounding through the hall like a forlorn sigh in defeat… or warning of what was to come.

King Vale lifted her from the dip, the music perfectly blending into a new tune, something equally as haunting but with a more feverish edge.

The eyes around them grew disinterested as the courtiers turned on each other. Dancing and drinking and smoking, flushed bodies twirling around where Luella and the King quietly watched each other. Couples and trios, groups and lone revelers, but she and King Vale stood still as statues in the midst of it all.

Luella looked to the King, whispering the words that clawed against her tongue to be released. A final cry, just like the finishing notes of their dance.

“My being here is evidence of your cruelty. You took me from everything. Stole me away in the night from my bed and slaughtered families. Innocents. My parents…” Her lip wobbled, even as she remembered how she detested the ones that had raised her. Detested her father’s cruelty and her mother’s indifference. “So yes, it is evidence of your cruelty. And I will never forget or forgive.”

King Vale’s grip grew slack on the chain between them, green eyes burning, and she tested it, tugging the length from his grasp. It fell from his fingers like sand, and she gathered it up in her palms, tethered to no one as she made her way from the dance floor, leaving the King to stand alone amidst the swirl of dancing. Unmoored on marble gilded with enchanted embers.

She looked over her shoulder, sparkles fell to King Vale’s hair and coated his lashes, brushed against the exposed skin of his tanned chest. She imagined she might look the same, like a glittering jewel garnished with stardust. Luella waited for the King to stop her from fleeing, but he did not. And she tried not to feel grateful for that small thing; what should have been a right, seen as a blessing—freedom.

Luella wove through the bodies, growing invisible as they reveled. Without King Vale by her side, she still attracted attention, but less so without any of her captors leading her.

And she soon realized why they had been so adamant about keeping her tethered to them.

Hands brushed against her skin, fingers knotted in the ends of her hair, forked tongues tasting the very air in which she walked. Nightmarish.

Claws reaching for her.

Bodies were all around, closing in on her, and Luella could do nothing. With her slight stature and lack of experience around such a crowd, she was like a doe thrown into a pit of hungered beasts. Blocked off from the sight of the alcove. She could not see any faces of familiarity. No matter which way she turned, she could not find her way back to her captors. The area around her suddenly grew yawning and vast, and her stomach clenched in fear, heart thundering in her chest. A wet, weak thump, straining as she whipped around, searching for someone, *anyone*.

She had to get away.

If only for a moment.

A flash of light in the middle of forever dark. The open doors that led to the gardens. She headed toward the saving grace of the doors, a tremble to her lips as she wove between the bodies around her, tripping and knocking into entwined couples in her haste.

Finally, she broke through the crowd and found silence.

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FIRST HINT OF WRONG

The cool night air kissed Luella's face, and she tilted her head up to allow it to caress her cheekbones.

The marble floor gave way to stone as she exited the throneroom, revealing a beautiful, private garden. A hedge maze of tall, green shrubbery stood proudly at the far end of the garden, the entrance dark and foreboding in the night. Two small apple orchards were on either side of the maze, low-hanging, red fruit and leaves offering serene canopies. Stone benches lined the walls of the palace, with lush, green grass underfoot, broken up by little pathways of cobblestone.

She had the sudden urge to remove her slippers to feel the brush of the grass under her feet, the cool earth between her toes.

Luella sank down on one of the benches, golden hair a thick curtain over one shoulder as she bent, lifting a foot to remove her slippers. Silk slipped over her skin and pooled against the earth as she untied the delicate laces and kicked off the slippers. Her bare toes sank into the grass, and she leaned her head back against the wall and sighed. With the way she was sitting, she could see partly into the throne room, but no one could see her in the shadows—just the way she liked it.

Solitude enveloped her, the faint chattering from court carrying out from the opened doors leading to the gardens, but she paid it no mind, forcing the laughter and clinking of glasses away as her eyes slipped shut, and she breathed in a lungful of air for what felt like the first time all night.

"May I have a taste." Words hissed into the quiet around her.

Her eyes popped open. The gardens were shrouded in darkness, the light of the moon covered by wispy clouds and only the faintest rays of glowing candlelight seeping out from inside. As she searched the grounds, her fists clenched the stone of the bench. The weight of the chain in her grasp was grounding, and she focused on how the links cut into her palm from her death-like grip.

Hidden in the shifting shadows stood a large figure.

Fear made her chest seize. She was alone out here.

A male leaned against one of the apple trees closest to her, holding a ripe fruit in his palm and throwing it in the air before catching it deftly. The sound of the apple hitting his palm made her jolt, and teeth gleamed as the stranger grinned at her evident fear. He stepped out of the shadows, and the clouds that had covered the moon moved as if doing so just for her.

Features were revealed by the purest white from above as the moon and scattering of glowing stars worked to cast their light down on the gardens below, hitting her skin and turning it into a milky pale shade, making the sparkles on her skin shimmer as it caught the light.

An alluring, otherworldy thing, ripe for the taking and near-screaming with bewitching temptations and moonlit promises.

A serpent shifter with inky black hair and dark—almost black—green eyes. The male had a short beard along his jaw. Something about him felt slimy and vile. Corrupted.

Unnatural, the shadows in his eyes stood out from the pure glow around them.

Luella shifted her head, peering inside the throne room, desperate as she searched for anyone who might be paying attention. But no one looked her way. She had loved being hidden in the shadows of the night, but now, it would be to her detriment.

The male prowled, hungry eyes resting solely on her.

She jerked to her feet, not wanting to stay seated and vulnerable. A hand pressed against the rough stone behind her, fingers curling into ivy crawling up the walls; the end of her chain was fisted tightly in her hand, the links biting into her skin so hard she wondered if it would cut through her flesh.

"Get away," she warned.

A laugh. "Not so tough without the King parading you about, heirus."

The male circled Luella, herding her like sheep toward the misty beginnings of the hedge maze. She knew she wouldn’t have a chance if he forced her into the dark, isolated space.

She opened her mouth to yell for help, but he lunged, a hand pressing roughly against her lower face to stop her from speaking.

"I wouldn’t do that if I were you," he hissed. His breath smelled like fruity wine and cloying smoke.

He leaned forward, hands tangling in the ends of her golden curls and bringing her hair up to his face, inhaling her scent. The grassy color of his eyes was overcome by a thick blanket of shadows before flickering back to a mottled combination of black-hued green.

So, so unnatural. She shivered. But there was no time to wonder why, with the male’s fingers digging into her hair and pulling her toward him with punishing force. She jerked away from him, and tangles of her hair caught in his fingers, making her scalp ache. A yelp bubbled over her lips, but the pained noise was stifled by the palm against her face.

The male gripped her upper arm, pulling her into his body. Tears burned behind her lids, and her whole body shook. She squirmed in his hold, but it didn’t get her very far. It only worked to incite his ire further, causing the hands on her body to curl and press against her, indenting her flesh and leaving reminders of this moment in the shape of purple bruises.

The whole garden stank of sour, rotten apples. A scent that would be forever etched into her memory.

"All alone out here, pretty, pretty Princess… Whoring yourself out to the King and his inner circle. Do you think they’d mind if I had a taste?" He licked up her neck, and Luella cringed at the slimy wetness on her skin.

She felt faint from fear.

His palm pressed harder on her lower face, the hand that gripped her arm snaking up to her chest.

Luella mumbled around the hand silencing her, feeling tears well up—she was truly and utterly trapped.

The hand against her face shifted, thick fingers slipping between her lips and pressing against her teeth. The opportunity presented itself with startling ease, and before she could think of the ramifications, she bit down. Hard.

"Fuck!" The male nearly bellowed, snapping his hand back and clutching it to his chest. Shadowed eyes narrowed into slits as blood welled

up on the deep teeth marks she had made on his fingers, trails of red trickling down to his palm.

Thank the gods she had bit down hard enough.

She didn’t have long to revel in her small victory. As quick as the raspy breath that filled her lungs, a sharp hand hit the side of her face, making her head whip to the side from the force of the blow, her cheek and jaw stinging, mouth bursting with the tang of iron.

A shaking hand lifted to press delicately against her lower lip. It came away wet with blood.

He had broken her skin.

Luella stumbled back, cowering away from his raised hand, poised to strike again.

"P-please," she whispered, tongue thick as she spoke around the pulsing pain in her jaw and cheek.

Mouth cut into a vicious scowl, his hand swept forward in the air, readying for a second blow against her already bruised skin.

A sharp growl cut through the still shadows of the gardens.

"Get your fucking hands off of her." That voice that was so familiar to her—which once sparked fear, but now all she could feel was relief at the sound.

Her shoulders sagged, and the hands that were on her body began to shake.

The Prima, the one who had first captured her with a dagger to her throat, was now poised to attack one who wished to do her harm, all with the same glinting and wickedly sharp blade. She never thought she would be relieved to see it again. Could still feel the cool brush of the steel against her neck as the mage had loomed over her. But now the tip of that blade was poised to defend her…

"Tharen—" Luella whispered, but her plea for help cut off as the male holding her suddenly turned and forced her in front of him, using her as a shield.

"Stay back," the male warned, fingers digging into Luella’s neck so tightly that she knew even more bruises would be left from his touch.

She was a map of bruises and scars, lines and cuts. Haunting leftovers to remind her of all she had been forced to endure.

Tharen laughed, the noise so unhinged and purely insane even she felt scared by what the mage was capable of. He took a step closer from the

shadowed corners he had emerged from near the hedge maze, dagger held loosely in his grip like he didn’t have any qualms about who would be walking away from this fight—but his posture portrayed anything but a lack of care, tight as a bowstring, shoulders tense, and muscles rippling.

"You must not be attached to those hands, Treye," Tharen remarked.

The male, Treye, tugged Luella back further. Her toes nearly dangled off the ground as he pulled her body up, cowering behind her.

"A-ah," she hiccuped, hands scrambling against the forearm latched around her neck to stop him from cutting off her airflow.

Rotten with fear, sour apples curdling in the air and turning to worm-infested, bruised flesh.

"You cannot fault me for wanting a taste, Prima. She smells divine. Strawberries and fresh cream and roses. Everything succulent and sweet. Innocent. The King has had a taste. *You* have had a taste… The rest of the circle, too, I’m sure. One more wouldn’t hurt." His tongue prodded at her neck, a sharp nip of teeth against her fluttering pulse. "You know *he* will have her eventually." Treye ran his nose along her shoulder, fingers cutting into her windpipe and forcing her head to tilt back, her face trained up at the sky.

The light of the moon seemed dimmer. As if it was mourning for her.

Luella gagged. Mind reeling. She didn’t understand what Treye was saying. The *he* that he spoke of…?

Fear clouded her thoughts and made her limbs heavy with a constant buzz of adrenaline, draining with every passing moment and leaving her cold and shivering.

"If it’s a taste you’re wanting, that can be arranged, Treye. Just let her go, and I’ll inform King Vale that she will be sent to your estate later." As if testing the sharpness of the blade, Tharen dug the point of his dagger into his finger as he spoke.

From the male’s strange words, one thing was made clear to her. His insinuations that she had been… intimate with King Vale and his court. And that Tharen would easily send her off to be at the whims of her attacker.

She tried to speak, but the hand on her throat robbed her of her voice, her neck straining as she tried to get away from her assailant’s touch. At this point, she would gladly run into Tharen’s arms.

Treye’s hold on her loosened, and she stood on her tiptoes, digging her elbow into his stomach to try and put some space between them.

A sharp cry expelled into the night air. The hands on her body left her, and without the support, she crumpled, plush grass cushioning her knees. Luella scrambled back, dress dirtying where it dragged on the ground. She huddled near the stone bench, hiding half of her body behind it and watching the scene that unfolded before her, something straight from a nightmare.

It was horrible.

Treye clutched a hand to his chest. The ends of his fingers were blackened to a charred crisp. Tharen stood proudly, not even touching Treye. Flames sparked in the mage’s palm, tanned and scarred hands waving in front of him as his flames suddenly went out with a cool rush of air.

The ground below her rumbled, the roots of the apple trees nearby shooting from the ground and trailing like vines to wrap around Treye’s ankles, keeping him in place. The brown roots crawled up his body, winding around his legs and torso. He yelled out as they squeezed, blood dribbling down cuts made from thorns that sprouted along the gnarled roots.

"Fucking gods," Treye garbled. He clawed at the roots, but it was no use.

Teeth gleamed, sharp face twisted up with viciousness as Tharen tightened his fist, and the roots stopped all motion, freezing at the male’s upper chest and keeping him trapped.

The Prima walked forward, kicking at the bottom of Treye’s booted foot where it was held in place by the roots.

"I believe the King would wish to mete out your punishment. As much as I would like to have the killing blow…" Tharen trailed off, icy eyes flicking to where Luella was cowering next to the bench. At whatever he saw in her expression, he grew even more furious. "But I won’t be held responsible for whatever state he finds you in." Tharen closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were a shining, bright blue—so bright and unnatural, it made Luella’s eyes water. She had to look away from him.

Treye screamed, back arching and body quaking as he tried to flee from whatever invisible blows Tharen dealt. It must have been magic of the Spirit or Body. An attack on the corporeal form of Spirit, most likely, from how the mage’s eyes were an otherwordly blue. The light of his spirit flooded through Tharen’s pupils, as red blood flowed from Treye’s nostrils

and ears. Blood welled and trickled from the male’s shadowed eyes like scarlet tears.

"Make no mistake," Tharen seethed, looming over Treye’s broken, trapped form like a harbinger of death. "*He* will never have her."

The mage’s words fell on Luella’s unhearing ears, and she cringed from the grotesque sight, huddling deeper behind the bench, thighs scraping against the roughness of the stone. She wrapped her arms around her knees, trembling. She wished it would all be over. Her throat ached. She felt like she was in a dream. Body floating and mind hazed with waves of terror and the feel of hands on her.

She didn’t know how much more of this she could take. Not just of the utter brutality and savagery she had been forced to bear witness to, but of the constant assaults and attempts to take what she would not *ever* offer. Threat-laced words hurled like sharpened daggers against her skin, and hands grabbing and taking and *pulling*… A choked sob escaped from her pale lips.

The pained screams and the blood—it was ghastly. Every part of it.

But then, it all stopped.

Treye went silent. She saw his eyes were closed, head lolling to the side; blood streaked down his cheeks and caked his neck. Iron and sour apples assaulted her senses.

Tharen walked toward the bench, taking a knee as he crouched before her. After what he had just done, the mage was surprisingly gentle with her, not coming too close and holding his palms before him in a placating manner.

"Luella." The sound of her name on his lips was her undoing.

Tears spilled over her waterline and trickled down her cheeks, vision growing cloudy with the salty dampness. "Is h-he… gone?" Luella choked out. She could not bring herself to ask if Treye was dead.

"He will not touch you anymore," Tharen said. The mage looked perturbed. The lack of lunacy that usually darkened his face was gone—it was a strange look for him. "How did you get out here alone?"

"K-King Vale let m-me go." She couldn’t stop stuttering. Her whole body shook.

"Godsdamn it all to the Below," Tharen spat and stood, strong knees forcing his body up. He loomed over her, but instead of feeling scared, she merely felt protected. A part of her hated it. Hated how she had been

conditioned to *feel* for her captors. Slotting his dagger back into the sheath, the mage ran a hand through his white braids, ruffling a few of the woven strands. "He never should have..."

A flurry of movement made Luella hunch back further into the safety of the bench; her spine pressed into the unforgiving stone, and she relished in the grounding feeling of it—anything to break up the waves of fear that threatened to drown her.

Bastian tore into the gardens, stumbling out of the throne room and into the thick night.

"Tharen, I can’t find—" His words cut off when his eyes fell on her, right where she was curled up on the ground. A breath blew out from sensually plump lips. She could see the fear that had gripped him leave with the soft woosh, tense shoulders slumping. A strand of silky black hair fell over his forehead, and a pale hand shoved it back. "Luella," Bastian exhaled.

She was far too addled to note how he had used her name and not the term he seemed to find much enjoyment in using—*pet*.

The vampire drew closer, taking in the male with blood on his face, held captive by the tree roots; Tharen’s set jaw and clenched fists; and Luella huddled in the shadows, trembling with tears drying on her pale cheeks.

"Fuck," Bastian cursed. "What happened?"

"You know what," Tharen seethed. An accusing finger pointed at her as he spoke. "She never should have been allowed to go off by herself."

"Blame Vale. Not me." Bastian didn’t use a title as he said the King’s name. The familiarity of the term was a distant, fleeting thought ricocheting off the jumbled mass of fear clouding her mind. He came closer, kneeling on the ground just as Tharen had. "Luella," he coaxed. She looked up, lip quivering as she met his reddened eyes. His voice was far too soft, but his expression was anything but. He looked furious. More so than she had ever seen. It made the soft planes of his inviting features cold and detached. "Come out, pet. You’re safe now."

A hand stretched out toward her.

Scooting forward, she placed her fingers in the vampire’s cold palm. His hand enveloped hers, and the difference in size did something to ease the panic welling within her. It made her feel protected and small.

Safe.

She ignored the implications of that. Ignored how everything in her called to him. That vacuous pit of her soul singing with feeling. Little pieces she thought would be forever broken, melding back together.

The healing of her soul was so infinitesimal she wondered if it was imagined.

Wondered if it even mattered.

With how many horrors she had been forced to withstand, could the pieces even be put back together the way they were meant to? Or would the edges forever be corroded, misshapen lines forced into place?

Luella felt as though she was teetering on the edge of some grand revelation, strung up by her wrists, threads of fate cutting bloody lines into her skin.

Too broken to fix… Too tainted to mend. Ruination had become her.

Bastian pulled her to her feet, cradling her against him as she leaned her weight on him. Her legs were wobbly. He passed a firm hand down her hair, undoing some of the curls that had been pinned in place.

"Call the others," Tharen ordered Bastian.

The vampire merely nodded in reply, one hand steadying Luella as his other pressed to his temple as if he were in deep thought.

Mind magic.

So quickly that it made her even more dizzy, Graves appeared, landing light on his feet.

Dazed, she glanced up. She had almost missed it in the darkness of night, but a small alcove above the double doors leading to the gardens jutted out from one of the many rooms of the castle. Graves didn’t even stumble as he fell, landing perfectly on his feet, not a wrinkle in his clothes or a sound to announce his presence. His hood stayed perfectly fixed upon his head, concealing him from view and shrouding him in secrets and shadow. A few black, silky feathers floated around him, fluttering in whispers of the cool wind before they rested on the grass.

Keen, deep blue eyes took in the male stuck in the roots before sharply landing on Luella. Still as a predator, the raven shifter did not speak. A rustle of fabric as his head cocked to the side, gloved hands flexing.

A shaky breath tore through Luella’s lungs, and though she could not see his face, she knew he caught the noise, knew it pleased him to hear her rattled.

The King was last. Sweeping into the gardens with heavy footsteps, there was a sway to his gait, a little stumble, so slight she barely noticed it —from the wine or many drug-imbued cigars he indulged in, no doubt.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sprinkles of glitter were still on King Vale’s cheekbones, and in the darkness of the gardens, it shimmered like enchanting sunbeams.

"Your little war prize was almost taken. It would do you well to keep your trophies locked away." Tharen kicked at the gnarled tree roots around Treye as he spoke, the veins in his neck pulsing with barely controlled anger. But his voice was calm. Too calm and detached. Deranged deadliness. Some feral entity masquerading as a male.

A harsh shiver wracked through her, but not from the cold.

King Vale staggered back as he finally saw Treye, head whipping toward her. Ordinarily, she would feel flustered to be the center of such attention, but she could only feel the sharp bite of shock rushing through her chilled veins. Green eyes roved over her, taking in her red-rimmed eyes and still quivering bottom lip. His head hung low, and suddenly, his golden crown looked like it was weighing him down with the weight of the entire universe. At that moment, he didn’t look like the King but a shell of a male.

"You made a mistake, Vale," Bastian growled, pulling Luella closer to him. "You let her go. Too ruled by your stubborn dragon pride, and look what happens. It’s always the same with you."

Like he was donning an iron-willed persona, the King’s head snapped up, shoulders rolling back, as he sobered up in an instant.

"*You* misstep." King Vale walked closer to where Luella was curled into the vampire, a warm hand landing heavily on her trembling shoulder. He was slightly taller than Bastian, and with how close they were standing, it was evident. The King used their difference in height to his advantage, holding his chin up high with feral regality as he looked down his nose at the Advisor. "Do not speak against me, Bastian. Remember your place. I was… No matter." He paused as if to collect himself, and she almost missed the strange flicker of regret that flashed over his features. "It will not happen again. But do not ever question me or my decisions."

King Vale forcibly removed Bastian’s hold from around Luella’s shoulders, pulling her snug under the crook of his arm. She tried not to flinch back while another part of her sang at the warmth radiating from him.

The scent of crackling, burning wood and crisp cedar enveloped her. She breathed in deep, a tiny part of her missing Bastian’s cool embrace.

The King took the end of the chain from where she was clutching it to her chest. She had almost forgotten about it—but not quite. Not with the constant weight of it around her wrist.

"Oh," she mumbled, still dazed. It was like a fog had settled over her. Even her hands felt cold and numb.

Graves, who had been silent the whole time, spoke. The gruff sound of his voice startled her. "It was my fault as well." He kicked off from where he had been leaning against the side of the stone wall, expression grim. "She was in my care, and I let her out of my sight."

From where she was pressed close to him, she felt King Vale let out a heavy sigh, the silk of his shirt rubbing up against her bare, chill-pebbled arms. "Do better next time. As will I," he said, weary. "This will not happen again." It took her a moment to realize the King was speaking to her.

"Why should I believe you? Isn’t this what you want? Me, broken and suffering." Luella whispered into the night, words as fractured as she felt.

She wondered why they weren’t angry with her. After all, it was she who had left King Vale.

With a white-knuckled grip on the hilt of his dagger, Tharen spat out, "I only enjoy your suffering when I’m the one causing it."

Lingering vestiges of fear escaped her, and she was left bereft and unmoored in the wake of it. She felt parched, mouth too dry and limbs heavy with lethargy. Shock pressed upon her like storm clouds, rippling with thunder and streaked with bolts of lightning.

She just wanted to sleep.

"We’re trying to keep you safe." Bastian gestured to the golden links of the chain, the end held loosely in the King’s grip. "The chain *was* for your protection, pet. Not so we could lead you around like a—well, a pet."

Her cheek rubbed against the King’s chest. Not a nod, but it must have been as close to acquiescence as they desired, for the attention was turned away from her. She melted as the weight of their stares left her.

"What of him?" Graves jerked his head to Treye, who had fallen into pained unconsciousness, held firmly in a cage made with the magic of Terra.

King Vale passed her off to Bastian, who took her almost too eagerly if the King’s warning look was anything to go by. "Take her to her rooms. Use

the hidden halls. Don’t let anyone see her." Cold fingers gripped her upper arms, and she barely registered his commands to the others. "Let’s go show the masses what the consequences of disobedience are. They could do with a spectacle. Fucking and liquor can’t entertain forever." At his harsh words, she peeked up at him, thick lashes a dark fan over her bloodless cheeks as she took in the male who had stolen her freedom.

A wicked smirk was carved into King Vale’s lips, turning the dragon shifter’s visage into one that fit his reputation—cruel and unjust.

Luella turned her head away from him, unable to look any longer.

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SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

"Try to sleep, pet." Bastian shut the door to her room gently and led Luella inside with a hand on the small of her back.

Another shiver wracked her frame, and she wrapped her arms around herself. The chain clinked from the movements, and the sound unnerved her. Reminding her of things she wished to forget.

"Let me help you," Bastian said, voice quiet, as he suddenly turned her to face him. He stretched out her arm, pressing an elegant finger against the chain, a few pieces of the thin links dissolving like dust and releasing her wrist from its grasp.

She breathed a sigh of relief at the feeling of freedom. The chain hadn’t been too tight, but what it symbolized had been as constricting as being in the dungeons.

Luella looked up at the vampire, a few tangles of her golden curls swaying along her back. "Where will you be?" she asked, hesitant.

Fear made her voice a soft and meek thing; she would be forever marked by the things that had happened to her here in this den of wickedness. Even if she knew Treye would soon be nothing more than a lifeless body. She still felt eyes peering at her from shadowed corners, hands against her skin, leaving memory-filled bruises.

In the night, her room seemed too big and too dark. The canopy over the bed fluttered in the breeze that came from the cracked open doors of the

balcony. She imagined spirits crawling from the white gauzy strips, suffocating her while she slept, and a whimper escaped her.

"I'll stay," Bastian uttered, hands pressing shakily against her. He was cold, and that fact alone made the touches welcome. Luella didn't think she could stand to be touched by someone warm right now. He swallowed, the noise far too loud in the quiet room. "I'll do whatever you need. I hope you know by now you can trust me. At least, more than the others."

"I do," Luella said in reflex. But she was startled when she realized her words were not a lie.

She trusted him.

And she knew she could trust him more than the others—but how much more? Only time would tell.

For now, this delicately novel companionship they had forged would have to do.

Bastian had never done anything to directly harm her. Had even stuck up for her in front of the King. If loyalty could be earned, perhaps this vampire was beginning the long—almost never-ending—pathway toward it.

Call Luella reckless, she didn't care, she wanted him to be with her tonight. If only to ward off the monsters she imagined lurking in the dark.

"Stay." She was pleased that her voice did not falter.

Red eyes searched her gaze for a moment before he nodded, cold hands ghosting over her shoulders, not quite touching. "Do you want to disrobe?"

Luella gasped. "No!" Her cheeks grew rosy. She hoped in the dim room, he couldn't see how his words had affected her.

He chuckled, the sound warming her all the way down to the tips of her chilled toes. "Not in that way, pet. I meant for you to change into your nightwear." Plump lips curved as he mumbled something else under his breath. Too low for her to make it all out, but it sounded something like *not yet*.

"Okay," she breathed, looking down as her lashes cast shadows along her soft cheekbones.

Bastian opened her wardrobe, fingertips brushing along blush pink silks and woolen capes. He pulled a soft-looking, thin maroon slip from within. Holding it up before him, Bastian quirked a dark brow. "This will do." He wasn't asking. The vampire pressed it into her hands. "Go change. I'll be waiting. If you need help… don't ask. Not if you don't *truly* mean it."

His words left no room for interpretation—even for an inexperienced heirus like herself—and the blush on her cheeks darkened even more.

She would not ask of that from him. Never.

Even if her legs trembled like a newborn fawn as she walked to the bathing chamber, almost tripping on the hemline of her gown. Shutting the door behind her, she let out a long sigh, leaning back against the closed door. Luella held the thin nightgown to her chest, too tired to move as she gave herself a moment to gather the pieces of her scattered thoughts.

A deep chuckle carried to her ears through the closed door.

Luella knee-walked across the plush mattress, careful not to disrupt the array of blankets piled on top of it.

Or the vampire lounging against the many pillows crowded at the head of the bed.

Silently, Bastian watched her, a knee bent while the other was stretched out. His arms were behind his head, a pose of relaxed invitation. When she settled down as far as she could get from him without teetering off the edge of the bed, he huffed.

"That won’t do." Bastian dragged himself from where he was reclined, and quick as a whip, his cool arms snaked over her bare shoulders, with one wrapping around her slim waist.

She let out an indignant sound as she was pulled snugly to his side. This close, she could feel the unnatural chill radiating from his skin.

"I was more comfortable over there," Luella said, as she tried to remove herself from his iron grip.

Bastian tsked. "I don’t think so, pet. You were about to topple off the bed. I can’t be that horrible of a bed partner, can I?" He grinned and forced her to settle down with hands pressing her to lay back. Her cheek pillowed on his chest, and his fingers tangled in her hair.

She had brushed through the strands and removed the clip so the glide of his fingers was smooth as silk and comforting. She sighed languidly, toes stretching out before curling her knees up to her chest, the front of her legs pressed against Bastian’s side.

Luella stamped down the traitorous thoughts whispering in her mind, threatening to disrupt her fragile peace. Thoughts of violence and bloodshed. All while she felt ashamed at willingly finding comfort in the arms of her enemy.

She was tired. Shock still flowed through her. Treye’s unwanted touches against her neck constantly looped through her mind. She hadn’t had the chance to look yet, but in the morning, she was sure a bruise would be blooming on the delicate skin that he had squeezed.

"If you make one untoward move…" Luella warned sleepily, curling further into Bastian’s side.

Breath puffed on the top of her hair as he laughed. "Was that a threat?"

"If it was?" she mumbled against his chest, breathing in his rich bergamot scent.

"Then I’d have to counter with a threat of my own." His fingers stilled in her hair. "If you don’t stop tempting me, I’ll be forced to lay you down on these sheets and have my way with you. I can guarantee you’ll enjoy it. So perhaps it’s not a threat. More like a promise." She shivered. Bastian resumed stroking her hair, and his voice grew gentle. Quiet. "I wish I had been there so I could have stopped it."

Luella swallowed. "It was my fault. I l-left. I shouldn’t have."

"Promise me you won’t do that again. Don’t leave. I’m trying to protect you, Luella. I’m trying to keep you alive." The sound of her name on his lips made her flush. He made it sound so… sensual.

When she didn’t respond, he turned her face up to look at him, a cold palm against her cheek. His eyes were soft, the red webbing throughout the rich brown lighter than she had ever seen it. "Promise me."

Even though she knew it was a lie, even though she knew she had every intention of leaving at the first chance she could get, she still opened her mouth and said, "I promise."

He nodded, appeased for the moment, but the way his eyes searched hers, reading the things she left unsaid, she knew this topic was far from over.

"Get some rest. I’ll stay with you."

Luella curled herself along a body, arms wrapping around a firm stomach and a leg thrown over a hip as she attempted to meld herself to the comfort of the male beside her.

In her groggy, sleep-addled state, she couldn’t care less that she was being so forward.

Sleeping with her enemy.

Dreaming beside the thief of her thoughts.

Squeezing her eyes shut, a soft sound escaped from her lips at the memory of the scent of sour apples.

Someone shushed her, a hand stroking lightly over her hair, and she settled again, hugging the body even more fiercely.

The chest her cheek was on rumbled, words washing over her in her half-awake state. "This cannot happen again."

"It won’t." She knew that voice. It didn’t belong to the vampire under her. The tenor was too deep. Slightly scratchy, like the speaker didn’t use it a lot—Graves. "We’ll make sure of it. Azgorath will help us. The demon can’t be against us forever. Not now. Not when the protection of the castle is so weak. The Umbra is closing in, their numbers growing."

Bastian’s hand stilled against her scalp. "We thought she would be safe here with us, but *his* reach grows closer every day. We can’t hold him off forever."

"I know," Graves sighed, "I know. Have faith in the Fates. It won’t be forever."

Who were they talking about?

Azgorath’s reach? Or someone else?

She was too confused and sleepy.

Luella furrowed her brow groggily, fingers curling in Bastian’s shirt.

"You’ll wake her up," Bastian hissed in warning. A finger pressed against her temple, intense drowsiness settling over her and fogging her mind.

Had he done something to her…?

Graves mumbled a reply and grew silent, but she did not hear it.

The crease between her brows smoothed out, and she felt sleep tug at her. However, she didn’t want to leave; she wanted to hear more information and digest the meaning of it all once she woke.

But it seemed the choice was taken from her, sleep dragged her down, down, down into its clutches.

In the quiet of the room, right before she drifted off fully, Luella found herself missing Az. As the memory of unwanted hands touching her floated behind her closed lids, she found herself wishing he was here—wishing that he had been there when Treye had hurt her. Luella was certain if the demon knew about what had happened, it would've been a bloodbath.

She found she didn't quite mind the prospect of bloodshed if her demon was the one doing it.

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LEASHES AND TEARS

The canopy fluttered around Luella as she sat on the edge of the bed, kicking her feet as she waited. The doors to the balcony were cracked open, and it let in a gentle breeze, chilling her exposed flesh.

Ina and Osa had just left after preparing her for the night's court. The silent maid had dressed her vigilantly, and Osa had ordered Luella to take better care of her gowns before the pair had left.

Luella drummed her fingertips against her thighs, the ruffly silk of her gown scratching her sensitive skin where it hugged her waist.

Her gown for tonight's court was the color of winking lights of stardust. The same shade as the iridescent swirls of light that had sparked from the embers of the chandelier. White swirls that caught the candlelight—a shifting moonlit-hued array of dark purples and inky tones.

The top of the gown was a halter style, clinging tightly to her neck with strands of silk while leaving her arms exposed and back bare.

She wore no corset. The skirt was a thin layer of rougher material made to look like silk but itchy and stiffer. And there were no slits in the layers this time—thank the gods. The fabric fell to her feet gracefully, hiding her bare toes. Ina and Osa hadn't supplied her with shoes, and she was too afraid to look into the wardrobe for any and accidentally mess with the order of clothes and evoke the red-haired maid's fury.

Without the bones of a corset keeping her wrapped tightly and posture perfect, Luella felt vulnerable and exposed.

But—

A small part of her whispered it felt nice to not be so caged by the rigidness of formalities. To be free and wild and untamed. Like the shifters.

Growing up in Solis, she had become accustomed to the reserved nature of the fae, but maybe—just maybe—the shifters had it right with their unfettered revelry and love for life. She still could not fathom their hedonistic traits, but the way the shifters loved who they loved and lived how they wished to live sparked her interest.

She had always loved nature and life and found herself fascinated with babbling brooks, whispers of air, scorching infernos, and small, often overlooked, animals. The way the shifters held dear to these things made her wonder if perhaps the fae had been wrong all along. Perhaps they put too much emphasis on propriety and status that they missed what was truly important.

No.

Luella growled and tore herself away from the bed, bare feet padding along the cool, stone floor as she paced back and forth, back and forth, deep in thought.

She would not allow herself to fall prey to this new world she has been thrust into. Wouldn't give her captors the satisfaction of knowing she found interest in their lands, in their ways.

Her pacing was interrupted by a swift knock on the door.

And entered Bastian.

A blush warmed her already-rouged cheeks at the sight of the vampire, who was decked out in maroon-encrusted finery, inky dark lapels of his coat gilded with red swirls and shimmering, golden buttons. His black hair was pulled back elegantly off his forehead, revealing his perfectly manicured brows and red-tinged eyes—a deeper red than she remembered they had been last night.

What made the color shift? Was it a hunger for blood? His mood?

She wanted to ask him. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she bit her lip. She had indulged enough.

Last night, when she had so unabashedly curled herself around him.

Luella had slept like a baby all night. She did not even remember waking up, not even once. Her sleep had been dreamless and peaceful—just

the way she liked it.

"Luella," Bastian greeted. His voice made her knees weak. He smelled divine. The bergamot of his scent was more pronounced and *so* enticing.

Her throat worked.

"Bastian," she replied.

The vampire smirked as if he heard her thoughts, one hand holding the door slightly ajar behind him. Curious, she peeked around his shoulder, trying to see as she stood on her tiptoes. Bastian blocked her view, tutting under his breath. "Pet, King Vale has a solution to make you more agreeable in court and—"

He was interrupted by the door giving way under his hand, making him stumble back.

Tharen strode into the room, Graves on his heels. Both were dressed in black and golden variations of the same style Bastisan wore but with a personal flair. Graves, with laces done snugly up to his collarbones and almost every bit of skin covered, a silky hood fixed over his head and a cowl pulled under his chin, ready to cover his face once he pulled it up. And Tharen wore a shirt this time, though the laces were undone. It was billowy and large, hanging off his shoulders like an opened coat.

"Something to keep you obedient," Tharen interjected. The dirty soles of his boots tracked splotches of mud and debris on the floor, sullying the edges of the carpets he stood on. A hand was behind him, and Luella could make out a chain peeking from the shadows, wrapped around his wrist like the end of a leash as it disappeared into the hall behind him.

She sighed.

Wonderful. Another night in chains.

"I do not need to be kept on a… leash. I learned my lesson." Luella looked down, chagrined. Her next words were hard to say, but she forced them past her lips. "I promise I'll stay by your side."

They didn't have to know all the promises she made were pretty little lies, delivered with a tongue of deceit.

"That one isn't for you," Graves said. He pulled an untethered chain from his pocket and dangled it in front of him, taunting.

Luella arched a brow. "Then…?" Her eyes flicked to the one Tharen had wrapped around his wrist, and the mage's grin grew impish as he gave a light tug on the end of the chain.

"Come, beast," Tharen called.

The door creaked open, and Luella followed the golden links of the chain as the candlelight exposed more of its length and what was at the end of it.

She realized a few things at once: these links were thicker than the ones Graves held, the metal pulsed with a dim white light from some enchantment, and the chain was already tied to someone, or something else.

All sound in the room ceased, it grew so quiet she could hear her ragged breathing in her ears as a large, imposing form, radiating warmth and security, was tugged into the room.

Luella's hands shook as she stared and stared at the demon before her.

Amber eyes burned bright with emotion, and the few specks of dirt that had marred his tanned cheekbones in the dungeons had been scrubbed clean. The demon wore a clean pair of simple, tan breeches and nothing else—no shoes, no shirt. The golden links of the chain were attached to a pair of thickly welded iron manacles that secured his wrists, pulsing with that same white light from the spells keeping it reinforced. The links diverged where they were secured to his manacles, another length hooking to an identical collar that was cuffed around his neck; it moved as he swallowed, his shoulders thick and stiff as he waited for her to say something—to do something.

But she was frozen, scared.

Red-painted lips parting, Luella could do nothing but stand completely immobile, amber eyes fixing her to the spot, her feet heavy. She scrunched her toes, staring at him, and he took in all of her, watching the movement of her feet from where her toes peeked out from under the thick skirt of her gown.

Something akin to awe made his features soften. It reminded her of the very first moment she had laid eyes on him in the dungeons—the way he had seemed crestfallen and reverential, all at once. Lamenting the fact she was in the situation she was in, but glad to be near her, regardless.

Now, in this room, with the others watching and no iron bars keeping her and the demon apart, she was nervous—that somehow it was all a lie or a dream. In her fear, maybe she made it all up, and maybe he wasn't as soft to her as she had imagined.

It seemed she wasn't the only one with reservations. With a bated breath, the demon was stone, horns curling high atop his unruly mop of dark brown curls. His hands clenched by his sides so forcefully that his

knuckles turned white. Chest heaving with shaky inhales, and those beautiful amber eyes never once left her wide golden ones.

Az made to step forward, but Tharen pulled back on the chain. The action jerked his hands and the collar around his neck at once, causing his jaw to pulse in anger from being forced to stay away from her.

“I don’t think so, beast,” Tharen tutted.

Az looked at the mage with such anger it made Luella quake where she stood. Even if that fury was not directed toward her.

He growled something low under his breath, and it sounded like that language he had used to soothe her to sleep with hushed lullabies. But where those murmurs had been whispered softly, this word was a grumbling curse.

Tharen poked his tongue in his cheek in response. "Remember who owns you now, Azgorath. Do not try me."

Bastian cleared his throat, mumbling, "Give them a moment, Tharen."

Luella was beyond grateful for the vampire…

The corded muscles on Az’s forearms grew more pronounced as he gave one last test of the strength of his manacles, attempting to pull his arms away from the enchanted iron keeping his hands captive in front of him.

But it was no use. It wouldn’t give.

The demon grew resigned, amber sparks in his eyes dimming with sadness, and his brow downturned as he waited for Luella to come to him. The way he watched her spoke of all the things left unsaid between them—lullabies and gentle hands; soft words and comforting whispers.

She hesitantly stepped forward, bare feet padding along the cool floor. They all watched her: Bastian, Graves, and Tharen—*Az*. A soft puff of breath escaped from her as she walked, the hem of her dress brushing along the ground behind her; she was careful not to trip, eyes trained down on her steps instead of the gaze boring holes into her.

Wary, she came to a stop a few steps from the demon, head titling up, up, up to finally—*finally*—take him in.

This close, she could see the haggardness of his features. Maybe it was the flickering candlelight that cast shadows over his face, but the dark circles under his eyes were more pronounced. Or maybe, in her absence, he had worried about her…

“Lu,” Az breathed.

And she melted.

Her lower lip wobbled, eyes growing blurry with unshed tears.

“I thought—“ Her voice broke. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Az stepped forward, closing up the last little bit of space between them, his chains clinking and growing taut as Tharen threatened to force him back. The mage’s hardened, ice-blue eyes tracked every little shift in the demon’s movements, just waiting for the opportunity to pounce and punish him for a misstep.

Manacled hands rose, and Az reverently brushed his fingers against her cheek. Leaning into the touch, her eyes fluttered shut. “Nothing could ever keep you away from me, my angel.”

Her lids drifted open, surprised to find a watery, crystalline sheen to Az’s eyes.

Tears.

This demon was crying… over her?

The brush of his calloused fingertips against her cheek brought a rush of memories barreling to the surface of her mind. A soft whimper, so quiet it was hard for her ears to pick up the sound, escaped from her lips. The males in the room grew rigid, their hearing much more sharp than hers.

Az clenched his jaw, a shudder wracking through his large frame.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Tharen jerked back on the chains, forcing Az away from Luella. The demon’s warmth left her, and Luella’s shoulders curled inward. Even in this room full of breathing bodies, with Az still so close she could touch, she felt more alone than ever.

Tharen’s features were pinched, the sharp lines of his jaw and the hollows of his cheeks severe in the candlelight. He caught her looking at him, and his eyes narrowed, the corner of his lip curling up. The mage tapped an absent finger on the hilt of his dagger that was strapped to his hip, and she looked away quickly, disturbed by the state of sharp, basal fear he seemed to evoke from within her.

"We should go." Bastian stepped toward her, ignoring the warning growl Az let out. "King Vale is waiting."

Bastian started to take Luella’s wrist to wrap the chain around it, but Graves stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Let me," the raven shifter grumbled.

Graves took the chain, delicate links pooling like water in his palm—made to cage a magicless princess, and not at all like the thick iron of Az’s enchanted shackles. He carefully wrapped the end around Luella’s wrist.

Fitting a finger underneath, he tested the tightness, keen blue eyes shining as he gave it a slight tug to ensure that it was not too constricting. The action warmed her chest.

Graves offered the end of the chain to Tharen, who took it with a wicked half-grin.

"I have you tonight, little lamb. Let’s hope you don’t stumble into trouble. I won’t be as forgiving as Graves was."

The mage did something Luella didn’t expect. Instead of tying off the end of the chain to his belt loop, Tharen welded it to Az’s manacles with scorching flames flickering from his fingers—heating the ends of the gold and making it malleable, fitting the flame-softened substance to the side of one of the iron cuffs, before whispering an unnatural breath of cold air over it, turning it solid once more.

Luella was now tied to Az, who was secured to the mage. She tried not to think of what that might entail for the night to come.

The taut length of the chains forced her closer to Az; the golden links were shorter than the night prior from how little space Tharen had left to dangle between them. The demon’s heat warmed her side, and she wasn’t sad to be in forced proximity to him—only fearful to be so near to Tharen.

She was utterly beholden to both males—one sworn to protect and the other, with no such vows made. Ultimately, she was at Tharen’s mercy—with how the demon was chained, she doubted Az could truly follow through on his oath to protect her with his life, no matter how the King may believe so—and she wouldn’t be surprised if the mage took advantage of it.

A tug against her wrists, and she stumbled into Az’s bare chest.

"Come, pet," Bastian called, Graves following after the vampire’s retreating form.

Tharen tugged on the chain with unhinged glee. "We don’t want to keep the King waiting."

And Luella entered her second night in court.

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DELICATE VENGEANCE

Tiny quakes rocked through Luella as she was pulled behind Tharen, the mage prowling through the crowd of revelers like an apex predator.

Though the links of her chains were delicate, that did not stop them from rubbing against her skin with every tug and pull of the mage in front of her. Red lips downturned, she stumbled after him, body buzzing with awareness from all the prying eyes on her. She felt so exposed, the halter-style cut of her gown revealing the expanse of her back and the full length of her arms.

She wished for a cover—could feel the burn of attention on her, curious stares and harsh whispers. Over the drowning waves of her fear, she couldn't make out much of what the courtiers were saying, only a few hissed words and spat phrases stood out to her, and each one made her steps grow heavier with dread.

"Eat her up…" Luella's palms grew clammy.

"*Kill*—" Her heart rate quickened.

"The heirus was made to fuck." An ashamed blush scorched her skin from the vile words.

Every word was a cut against her skin.

Every word elicited a growl from the demon protector chained to her.

Az was so close that her arm brushed against his with every step, her bare feet padding along the shimmery floor, stepping through the parted

crowds of entwined bodies. Teeth bared at the insults and mocking words. Az was strong and fearsome, horns curving from his head of dark curls, bare chest tanned and gleaming under the enchanted embers. Amber eyes swept over the crowd, pinning the watchers to their spots with unmasked promises of violence.

"I won’t let anything get to you, Lu," Az whispered to her, leaning down slightly as he spoke.

Biting her lip, she nodded. "It’s not you that I don’t trust," she said.

Tharen turned his head back to her, a grin catching on his lips, holding unhinged taunts. "Just me?"

Luella pushed herself closer to Az, who leaned into her, covering half of her body with his large frame to keep her away from the revelers around them—*and* the threat of the male before them.

"No…" Luella softly replied. "Not just you. And you know it."

The beginnings of the mage’s grin turned to a snarled smile in full force, a large, scarred hand sweeping back one of the white braids that fell over his shoulder, tugging on the chain and leading her and Az further into the room.

The bodies parted easily around them, no one daring to get too close to the wicked Prima. Luella could spot his trio pack of white wolves at the far corners of the room, prowling about the shadowed edges in wait. One of the wolves sat back on his haunches, chewing a red chunk of some type of meat.

She hoped it was animal meat.

The serpent shifters and a few wolf shifters from the allied kingdom of Nix looked at her with blatant curiosity delivered with an undercurrent of hatred, peering at her with open interest. A male and female were wrapped around each other amid the dancing bodies, the female’s skirts rucked up her tanned thighs, and her head of rippling brown curls was thrown back in blatant ecstasy. The male caught Luella staring as she passed by, the side of his full lips curving up and a hand with pointed claws reaching out as if he wished to touch her.

Az growled so loudly it made Luella jolt. "Get your fucking eyes off of her."

The male jerked his clawed hand back. No one else reached for her.

Gratitude swelled within her for Az’s protective presence. Maybe it had been wise to have the demon accompany her.

"You’re a good guard dog, beast," Tharen said, without turning as though he could read Luella’s mind.

Az merely rumbled a low growl in his chest in response, pressing himself closer to Luella like a shield.

She bristled on Az’s behalf, but a warm finger brushing against her side made her bite her lip to stop herself from speaking. Az did his best to reassure her with how his hands were held captive in the thick manacles. His touch made her arms pebble with a stark chill of awareness.

The sights around the room caused her to blush, and she tried to keep her attention diverted. The sounds though—those were hard to ignore. Gasps and cheers and raucous calls, voyeurs delighting at the spectacles. Whistles, wolven growls, and the thundering rumbles of dragons hidden inside cages of flesh, all reveling in lechery with wanton approval.

Tharen stopped near the dais before the throne, a small collection of regal chairs were set near it, looking out over the room like spectators.

King Vale sat upon the golden throne, a leg crooked atop a knee, as he rested his chin on his hand and regarded his court with a complete lack of interest. Until his green, serpentine eyes landed on hers. King Vale straightened in his throne, head tracking her every movement as Tharen led her and Az to sit in the chairs near the throne.

At least, Luella thought she was supposed to sit…

"No, no, no, lamb. What are you doing?" Tharen crooned. He took a seat on one of the high-backed, plush chairs, waving a hand lazily to attract the attention of a passing servant for some wine.

"Sitting?" Luella gulped under the mage’s scrutiny, Az nudging his side into hers for comfort.

"On one of these chairs?"

Luella broke his gaze, stumbling over a quiet, "Y-yes."

"Why is it you think I would allow that?" Before she could reply, Tharen continued. "I’m neither Graves nor Bastian, Princess. You would do well to remember that. I won’t coddle you. And I certainly won’t let you have the creature comforts you fae are so fond of."

"Careful," Az warned beside her, amber eyes sparking with protective fury.

Tharen briefly looked at the demon, rolling his eyes before flicking his hard, icy stare back toward her. She shrank away.

"Kneel," the mage ordered.

King Vale watched it all silently, the corner of his lip curling up with the slightest of twitches. The rings on his hands glinted as he tapped a finger against his knee.

Tharen arched a pale brow, fingers tightening around the end of Az and Luella’s chains.

White puffs swirled from his fingertips, a lazy twirl of his finger, and before she could blink, Az was forced to his knees by some unseen thing.

The demon’s nostrils flared, and Tharen chuckled, victorious. The mage lifted a hand, swirls of air weaving around his fingertips and forming a small cyclone above his palm. She felt the rush of air sting her cheeks, a few pieces of her golden hair whipping to the side.

A tug on the bottom of her gown. Luella jolted, head jerking to find Az’s large, tanned hand fisted in her skirts, his fingers burning through the fabric and heating her thigh.

"Listen to him," the demon instructed, looking up at her from his spot kneeling on the ground. A warning simmered behind his usually soft amber eyes.

"That’s right," Tharen interjected, taking a glass of wine from a servant and swirling it idly while he leaned back against the chair. The action mimicked the vortex of air as it spun before him. Barely the size of his hand, but it radiated such power she was subdued by the mere sight of it. "Listen to him. The beast is smart." A sip of a wine. "Why was it you were thrown into the dungeons, Azgorath?"

Az’s muscles flexed as if in preparation to strike. She grew tense, but before she could talk the demon down, his lids closed, and he breathed in deeply, hand spanning out against her thigh as if he was seeking strength from simply touching her.

"This time, Lu." Az let out a harsh puff of air. "Listen to him this time." He tugged her down, her knees hitting the ground with a quiet thump.

The side of her thigh was flush against his, and she couldn’t find it in herself to be mad at how degrading it was to kneel at the mage’s feet—kneel in front of all the eyes. It brought her so close to the demon that she felt her nerves fizzle away, finding safety in his presence.

As she looked out at the crowd of revelers, she was reminded of the dungeons. Of curling closely to the unforgiving iron of the bars separating her and Az, fingertips winding through the small spaces and holding firm to his large hands while she slept.

Small moments of solace in the strangest of places…

"I'll only listen this time, then," Luella said, emboldened by her proximity to her protector. "Next time, you won't be so lucky to have m-my… compliance."

Az huffed a laugh, and Tharen grew rigid in his chair, taking a large swig of his wine, fingers curling around the stem so tightly she thought it may snap.

Icy eyes bore holes into the top of her head. He radiated heat, his lap so close to her face, all she would have to do was lean over slightly, and she could rest her head against him—

A shake of her head cut off her thoughts.

Luella had to remain composed.

"One day," Tharen sighed. "One day, you will learn to tread carefully around me."

A flutter of wind breezed around her, and she flinched back, pressing herself close to Az. She waited for the mage to retaliate from her brave words, eyes squeezing shut as her muscles locked up in preparation for pain. But none came.

Only the faintest rustle of her hair around her as Tharen's magic of Aer carded throughout her golden curls, phantom fingers brushing her hair. Her eyes popped open as she looked up at the mage. He idly sipped at his wine, a finger swirling midair as he called his magic to toy with her. A whisper against her cheek, little curious, invisible tendrils learning her shape at the behest of its wielder.

A puff of air against her mouth, prodding at the seam. She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, refusing to open up.

Tharen released a deep chuckle from her side, a sound that he covered with the rim of his glass.

All at once, the magic of Aer left her.

Luella felt cold and strangely sad without the curious brush of the mage's power against her skin.

And that was that.

Tharen called for another glass, but this one was not a mild and sweet wine but a heady amber liquid, golden fizz sparking over the rim. Beads of condensation stuck to the outside of the glass, leaving glistening drops on his long fingers.

Time passed like that.

In a haze of liquor and smoke, as the mage drank and drank—with his heightened senses, he did not have a normal tolerance for alcohol. His eyes seemed as sharp and as vigilant as ever, even after what must have been ten glasses. And the mass of bodies grew louder, the light filtering in through the glass dome of windows above, letting in pale rays of moonlight, wispy clouds dotting the inky night sky, blotting out the few stars twinkling above.

Throughout it all, Az was a constant and quiet presence by her side.

Luella let out a deep breath, neck aching from where it had been craning back as she watched the sky. Because she could not bear to watch the crowd.

Rolling her shoulders back, she lowered her chin, the muscles in her neck stiff. She must have held that position longer than she thought. Her head swam as she blinked the room back into focus, taking in the entwined bodies and outstretched arms, all dusted with shimmers of gold—it floated about the room, tickling her nose and settling in her hair.

The enchanted dust clung to her lashes. She swiped it away with a delicate brush of her hand, the chains clinking from the motion. She blinked again, looking to the males by her side, only to find Tharen and Az already were already watching her with rapt attention.

"What?" Her voice was breathy, barely audible over the reveling court.

"Nothing," Tharen hummed. He took a sip from a glass that dangled between his fingertips. This liquid was purple and cloudy, the sparkling gold dust from the chandelier above fell to the surface. Was it safe to consume?

The amber in Az’s eyes was soft as he whispered, "You’re breathtaking, and you don’t even know it."

Luella started from his words, chains on her wrist growing taut as her fingers fluttered to her mouth. She was unused to compliments. Had never received anything of the sort at home—the few servants and tutors she had been allowed to be around chose their words carefully, and her parents acted as though she did not even exist. No one wanted to be associated with a magicless, disgraced princess.

"She is," said a new voice from her other side.

Luella turned, only to find King Vale, himself, standing behind Tharen’s chair, hands braced on the high back as he surveyed the trio, taking in where Luella knelt at the mage’s feet, her side pressing snugly into the horned, bare-chested demon tethered to her.

"I will admit, you look good in chains, kneeling at my feet. We should make this a regular occurrence," Tharen taunted.

Luella blushed at his words—it seemed to be the barest nicety the mage could muster.

The King’s nostrils flared, thin wisps of smoke blowing from his nose as he roughly let out a breath. "Prima, why isn’t she in one of the chairs?"

"Oh, chairs…" Tharen jerked forward, grabbing the seat of the chair next to him and pulling it closer, kicking his boots up on it. "I don’t see any other chairs. Do you?"

The King pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why do I bother," he mumbled under his breath. He rounded the back of Tharen’s chair, coming to stand before Luella. Her nose was right in front of his thighs, and her neck craned as she peered up at him. "Come with me." The King held out a hand.

Luella stood, looking toward the mage who held the end of her shared chain. Her arm stretched out uncomfortably as King Vale ushered her a bit further away from Tharen and Az.

"Tharen," King Vale demanded. When the Prima made no move to release the end of the chain, the King said once more, "She’ll be safe. Azgorath, come."

The demon stood, veins in his neck pulsing as the collar tugged against him, the length taut as Tharen took his sweet time handing over his end of the chains.

"Fine. I’ll have to find some other way to occupy my time," Tharen sighed dramatically. "The highlight of my night to have such a sweet little lamb pliantly on her knees at my feet." He stood, roughly slapping the chain in the King’s palm before he disappeared into the crowd. To find some fun, no doubt. And fun was all around if the high sounds of pleasure and laughs that rippled through the throne room were anything to go by.

King Vale held the chains loosely between his jeweled, tanned fingers, leading Luella and Az up the few remaining steps to the throne. With a flourish of his cape, he lounged back on the throne, golden crown gleaming under the luminescent candlelight.

He patted his thigh. "Sit."

"Do I have to?" Luella hedged, hands fumbling before her with hesitancy. She did not want to sit on his… on his *lap*. "I can kneel."

"Sit. Do not make me tell you again, Princess," King Vale ordered, tugging the chain and making her come to a stop between his parted legs.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow, and she looked to Az, who gave a short nod from where he stood to the side of the throne and watched her. Strengthened by the demon, she acquiesced, knowing he had her best interests in mind. She perched warily on the King's knee. King Vale huffed a sigh, wrapping a hand around her waist and pulling her closer against him. Her back was along the length of his chest, and she felt every rumbled breath he took, could feel hot puffs of air against the styled curls of her hair. She shivered.

"Azgorath," King Vale said.

And the demon went to his knees, taking up an identical pose to how he had knelt at Tharen's feet, thighs tucked under him as he faced out toward the crowd. The chain of his manacles stretched up to Luella's wrist, where she held her arm out over the armrest of the throne so it wouldn't tug on his collar and cause him discomfort.

A brown curl flopped over Az's forehead as he shifted, and she itched to reach down and fix it for him. Her exposed position on the dais made her hesitate. She didn't want to show weakness or vulnerability here in this court. These predators would jump on it in a heartbeat.

King Vale stroked an idle hand along her side, and she quaked from his touch. "They're right. You are ethereal. And your beauty is even more enticing knowing that you're mine."

"I belong to no one save myself. No matter how you try to break me, King Vale, I won't allow you to possess any more of me. You have my… freedom." She swallowed roughly. "Is that not enough for you?"

"Wrong," the King hissed. "I own you. You're already breaking. You just can't see it."

She wanted to scream. Wanted to tell him that she did not break easily. But he could smell lies, would know every word she whispered was only for her benefit, only to save her fragile mind.

She had been broken, and everyone could see the shattered pieces of her.

Luella curled her fingers into a fist, jaw aching from the force in which she ground her teeth. "If you want me to be a perfectly polished and pliant trophy, maybe you shouldn't have thrown me into the dungeons…" Luella trailed off, her bravado leaving her as the King's fingers dug into her side.

"How else could I have broken you? You’re my trophy of war, Princess Luella. And trophies must first be molded and polished before they can be shown off. If anyone dares to go against me, you’re a warning of what will happen if they do. What I am capable of."

"I hate you." Luella gritted her teeth. Vitriol clouded her thoughts; though, her body shook and shook, not allowing her to play pretend at bravery.

"No, you don’t. You only *think* you should," the King whispered over the shell of her pointed ear, breath ghosting over her flushed skin and leaving small shivers in the wake of him. He pulled away, and something inside her uncoiled, a heated awareness leaving her while a part of her wanted to follow after him and chase after the feelings he evoked.

Fingers smoothed over her ribcage, pulling her back to rest flush against him. "I have a present for you." King Vale held up a hand, and Graves materialized from the shadows of the little alcove to the side like he had been waiting beyond the door for the King’s command.

Bastian appeared from the other side of the throne, a golden scepter in his hands, held reverently. The vampire took a knee, presenting the golden rod to King Vale as he bowed his head. A strand of silky black hair fell over Bastian’s pale forehead, the silver rings in his ears glinting. "My King."

King Vale took the scepter, tanned, jeweled fingers elegantly wrapping around the rod. Bastian rose, the vampire coming to stand on the other side in front of Graves. Luella watched curiously, but that quiet curiosity soon disappeared as the blood drained from her face.

From the shadows of the alcove in which Graves stood, a chained male was dragged from the depths. A male who had haunted Luella’s dreams last night.

Treye.

She grew rigid on the King’s lap, and his hot breath puffed over her nape as he whispered, "He will not hurt you."

Luella didn’t believe him. Why else would he be here, if not to torment her?

Her attacker looked nothing like the regal courtier from the evening prior. Treye was haggard and broken, blood dried on his face and crusted on his neck. Mottled purple and black bruises were littered over his cheeks and jaw. His eyes were still an unnatural shade of black, the green she had briefly seen last night completely blotted out by inky shadows, and the

whites were shot through with red veins; the tips of his inky black hair were matted with blood and dirt.

He looked like he had been *tortured*…

A gasp tore through her.

King Vale banged the end of the scepter against the marble of the dais, calling to attention his court. The revelers grew silent in the span of a breath, awaiting what the King would do. Graves nearly dragged Treye to the bottom of the dais, the raven shifter's usual hood and cowl concealing his face from her. She would do anything to see his deep blue eyes—anything for reassurance from her silent captor.

But Luella was forced to meet her attacker's black eyes, and she whimpered, Az growling a feracious noise from deep in his chest like a guard dog, poised to attack.

Throughout the quiet of the throne room, one noise could be heard above all else: her thundering heart.

"This male threatened what was mine," King Vale yelled, voice booming throughout the room, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end from how close she was to the violent heat radiating from him. Her ears rang from the sound of his voice, and she shrank back against his chest, feeling his rumbling declarations sink into her skin and bones. "He tried to *take* what was mine! Do you all not remember what I decreed: any attempt on Princess Luella Ilis Eritrais's life would be taken as one on mine. To harm her is an act punishable by death."

Graves kicked the back of Treye's legs, forcing him to his knees. The male was rigid as he met the King's stare, unfaltering as he faced him. The shadows in his eyes swirled with hate.

Unnatural, *unnatural*. She hated it. Couldn't handle looking into the deep shadows for longer than a moment.

Her attacker knew what awaited him as surely as he knew he had gone against the King's decree. He would die—an irrefutable fact.

Tharen materialized from the crowd, his arrival precipitated by the parting of bodies and hushed, fearful whispers. His grin was a wicked and cruel thing, the glint in his eyes even more so. She never wanted to be on the receiving end of that stare. Even when he had stolen into her room and taken her away in the night, he did not look at her quite that savagely. This stare promised a fate worse than death.

In the time Tharen had been away from her, the mage had donned his twin broadswords, fastened at his back in a cross shape. With a whisper of sharpened metal, he unsheathed them both, holding them before his body with a warrior’s prowess.

Booted feet thudding as he came up behind Treye, Tharen licked his lips, the sharp edges of his features more pronounced under the flickering glimmer of candlelight.

"I waited for this," the mage crooned.

Bastian was silent at the King’s side, and Graves still held the end of the thick, rusted chain tethered to Treye. The raven shifter’s expression was grim, and when his dark blue eyes found hers, they seemed to whisper, *I’m sorry.*

Icy water rippled throughout her, and her hands fisted into the King’s shirt.

No, she tried to speak, but her voice was frozen.

I don’t want to see this.

Please don’t make me.

Her cheek brushed against the King’s chest, but he turned her face back out to the crowd with a soft tutting sound.

"Look," he whispered against her cheek lowly; the word was only for the two of them.

"How do you want it?" Tharen called to King Vale.

The King waited for a beat, and even Luella, with her dulled fae senses, could hear the thudding of Treye’s heart as he awaited his fate.

"However you want," King Vale paused, the crowd leaning forward with the anticipation of violence. "But make it messy." His voice projected throughout the room, doing nothing to hide the order from the listening ears of the shifters.

He wanted them to know, wanted them to hear. And their fear was a tangible thing in the wake of his order.

King Vale’s aim was clear to her, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

This could be *them*—the revelers watching… One slip-up, one misstep, and they could be at the end of the Prima’s blade, at the mercy of their King.

Her father had done the same thing a few times before, Luella recalled. All it took to quell the will of a crowd was one punishment. Memory was often short in a species long-lived but not of violence and anguish.

And if they needed a reminder… Well, there was always someone desperate enough to test the law.

"Gladly." Tharen’s ice-blue eyes glinted with intent. He ran a finger down the edge of one of his blades, contemplating. "Bare his neck," the Prima instructed Graves, who quietly forced down Treye’s head.

She was watching Graves so closely she noted the slight shake to his gloved hands, but he did not show any other sign of weakness.

Her attacker did not beg as he stared at the marble floor. The next moments passed by with a tense and weighted edge. The crowd was so quiet that she could almost hear the soft fall of enchanted dust as it fell from the chandeliers above, coating the floor like snow. Crystalline tears dropped to the floor, mixing with the red flakes of crusted blood that had fallen from Treye’s face, mingling with the golden shimmers about the room.

She was going to be sick.

King Vale spread his fingers over her side, fully enveloping her waist as if in comfort. As if he knew. He likely did. Her heart was loud to her own ears, and with how close she was pressed to him, she wouldn’t doubt if he could feel it thudding through the cage of her ribs. Az strained as his shackled hands came up to rest against her knee—a touch she felt more steadied by.

She met the demon’s amber eyes, chest heaving with short and shallow breaths as she tried to look away from the scene in front of her, the horror that was unfolding.

"It’s okay," Az mouthed. She placed her hand on top of his, his skin warm against her cold, clammy palms.

King Vale tucked a strand of golden hair behind her arched ear, leaning forward to ghost a soft kiss against the shell. "This is what happens when someone touches you, Princess."

"I d-don’t want to look." Her breath hitched as she stifled a sob.

"If that is what you wish," King Vale mumbled. He sounded perplexed at her rejecting his… *gift*.

She gave a trembling nod and felt him sigh behind her, a warm palm coming up to press against her eyes, enveloping her in darkness. Even with her sight taken from her, she still couldn’t get a full breath in her lungs—everything felt too small, too constricting. Like the chains around her wrist had migrated to wrap around her waist, squeezing, squeezing.

King Vale’s chin brushed against the crown of her head as he nodded, and Luella heard a soft whoosh of air as Tharen obeyed the King’s silent command. She imagined the swords sweeping downward in a graceful arc of gleaming silver, crossing perfectly against the back of Treye’s neck.

A dull thud.

The sound of liquid spurting, a few splatters painting the skin of her cheeks and splashing the shimmery material of her gown. Iron tanged against her lips. Her skin was wet with the spray of warmth.

She couldn’t do it anymore.

Luella shook her head, turning to fit her face fully into King Vale’s shoulder. Her body shook, and he grew stiff as her nose pressed into his neck, breathing in his cedar scent and finding solace in it—in him. He was so warm.

Az’s grip on her knee tightened, but still, she did not look. Did not turn away from her hiding spot nestled in the arms of her captor.

Not even when there was an odd squelching noise, the crowd cheering and Tharen yelling in triumph. The sound of the mage’s wolf pack snarling and howling as they feasted, tearing into sawed-off limbs and pieces she imagined Tharen threw to them.

She *really* was going to throw up. The scant amount of food in her stomach roiled.

King Vale cupped her chin, forcing her head from where she had hidden. "Enough," he commanded. "Look."

She opened her eyes, wary. Blood pooled against the white marble, but there was no sight of Treye. Just the snarls of the wolves as they feasted. The blood streaked from where they had lunged forward and dragged bits off to the shadows of the room.

The court was silent, hands that had been gripping flesh with pleasure now white-knuckled as they fisted their gowns and pressed trembling palms to their mouths.

"Why?" Luella’s voice trembled. "Why would you… do that?"

"You know why, Princess. To remind them all what happens if they mess with what is mine." King Vale stroked his thumb against her cheek, smearing the blood on her skin.

Sparkling embers were uninterrupted as they fell from the chandelier above, mingling with the blood on the floor and turning it into an iridescent

maroon. Some caught in her cheeks as she peered up at the King, and her lower lip jutted out.

He was golden as she looked up at him. Not one flaw or mark on his handsome face. Not one emotion that made her think he felt guilt for the violence he called for.

"You've had chances to prove me wrong in my assumptions of you, King Vale, but every time, you only confirm what I know. All of Serpentis, all shifters… are vile and wicked. You are the evil that must be defeated. And I fear we may never win against you."

"If only you knew that the evil we must fight is much worse than me. Far, far worse. And closer than you would imagine." King Vale snapped his jaw shut, gesturing for Graves. Tharen had disappeared into the depths of the crowd, and Bastian stood solemnly behind the King. "Take her," the King demanded. He didn't even look at her.

Az was silent beside her as Graves took their chains from the King. His hood shifted as he turned, and Luella saw a hint of his jeweled eyes, pinched with seriousness. He caught her looking and quickly turned away, unreadable as he tugged on the chain and pulled Luella and Az along. The crowd parted for the raven shifter, whispers following after him like shadowed secrets.

Fury radiated off of Az in waves; he didn't try to avoid the blood splatters on the ground, bare feet storming right through the gore and tracking prints of deep scarlet across the pure marble floors. His shackled hands brushed against her spine as he nudged her to the side—away from the blood, keeping her away from the taint of it as much as he could.

Bastian found her eyes where he stood stiffly by the throne, his red-tinted gaze locking onto hers. His plush lips were downturned at the corners, expression severe. He blinked, and Luella's feet tripped over each other, and she caught herself before she stumbled into Az.

A hazy memory suddenly danced along the edges of her mind. Voices speaking. Graves's gruff tone and Bastian's silky tenor, both hissing whispers that spoke of some… evil?

The Umbra—

Bits and pieces of the memory slipped through her fingers like sand. She tried to grasp it, but it was fuzzy along the edges. She recalled the feel of hands gently soothing her and a finger against her temple, forcing her back to sleep.

And sweeping away the memory of her ever having woken up.

Her brow furrowed as she put it all together. She had woken up last night and overheard *something*. And Bastian, with his Mind magic, had made her forget.

There was something going on here… Something *more*.

As she was led away, the mass of bodies parting around them like wispy smoke, she mulled over the King's words and her murky memories, recalling the clues scattered around.

Luella was reminded of the game of latrunculi one of her tutors had instructed her on—likening the world of politics to the game itself. A game of strategy and thinking ahead, reading your opponent, and knowing the board. Knowing when to play your strengths and when to concede.

Unbeknownst to her, the King had been engaging in a very strategic game of latrunculi, moving his pieces across the board in the grandest of games.

But it seemed King Vale had had enough of games.

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26

CAREFUL, THOSE HAVE TEETH

The metal of the chamberstick warmed Luella's palm as she grasped it.

She quietly padded across the cool floors of her room, the flickering light of the candle illuminating her steps and playing with the shadows, casting imposing, menacing figures across the walls. She tried to ignore it—the shake in her limbs still present after the horrors she had seen. The sound of flesh rending from bone, the snap of teeth, the soft whoosh of blades…

After Graves had left her, she had tossed and turned in her bed for what felt like hours, sleep escaping her, her mind too occupied with darkness and shadowed eyes. Secrets.

Too occupied with the beginnings of the plan in her head.

When sleep continued to slip through her fingers like smoke, the sweet relief of dreams lingering somewhere just out of reach, Luella decided to venture into the halls of the castle darkened with night and see if—without one of her captors leading her path—she could retrace her steps to the library.

Libraries held many a secret, Luella knew. They were vast wells of knowledge, ready to be tapped. Bastian had given her a gift by allowing her access to the library. One far grander than he likely assumed.

The gift of history.

She quickly opened her wardrobe and pulled a cloak from within, the material rippling like fine silk: thin and black—perfect for clandestine adventures.

Pulling the cloak around her shivering frame, she tucked her golden hair under the hood, concealing her identity as much as she was able. Her feet were bare, all the better to have silent steps throughout the halls. And where the cloak fell to her mid-thigh, her legs shimmered as the moonlight filtered in through the glass doors of the balcony, casting the brightest of whites against her skin.

Blue veins stood out on the underside of her wrist, and the sight made her heart clench. She used to love the sunshine—spent entire days curled up against the base of a tree as she read and dreamed. The Solis fae have always had a healthy, tanned glow to their skin, and Luella always loved how alive and bright it made her feel. But now she looked like a creature of the moonlight from her stint in the dungeons and captivity in the gilded cage of her room.

Features scrunched with determination, she placed her palms against the door leading to the hall, steeling herself with a deep breath as she slowly pushed it open. A low creak. Her teeth dug into her bottom lip. The noise was far too loud in the unnaturally silent wing of the castle.

Carefully, she shut the door behind her; the chamberstick held out before her as she tiptoed along the halls, her other hand tracing along the walls as she willed herself to remember the path to the library.

Further and further, she tiptoed, leaving the wing of the castle she had become accustomed to. Trepidation made her steps slow, and she took in the darkened halls around her. A tapestry on the far wall stood out to her as familiar, and she continued onward. Little alcoves were nestled in deeply shadowed areas, and she imagined wraiths crawling from their depths, shivering as her steps quickened.

At one fork in the hallway, she hesitated, one foot pointed in each direction as she tried to recall which way it was.

Left or right?

Right or left?

Luella veered toward the left, sending up a quick prayer it was the right choice.

As she recognized a few more tapestries and pieces of art—depictions of roaring dragons and valiant warriors—she realized she had chosen

correctly. The hallway she had picked led to a lone corridor that stretched on and on. At the very end, an arched doorway, which she knew would open up to the library.

Luella let out a breath of relief and quickly hurried along, eating up the distance until she was before the door, one hand braced against it. She snuck a peak behind her, the hood blocking out her periphery, but she saw nothing, only the long and lone stretch of shadowed darkness. But she was entirely exposed. Someone would only have to walk by the beginnings of the hall, and she would stand out. With that thought in mind, she pushed open the door and entered, her heart rapidly beating.

The door closed behind her, silent as it trapped her inside.

Adrenaline filled her with a rush of elated power. Now for the fun—if slightly daunting—part.

Water from the small fount trickled down to the awaiting pool, the noise welcomed in the quiet room. Her ragged breathing and the steady drip, drip, drip of the water calmed her. The glass dome above rendered her candle unnecessary. The moon shone brilliantly, casting pure, white beams over the leather chairs in the alcoves and the towering shelves along the walls.

"Where do I begin?" The question was but the faintest puff of air.

As Luella looked around, she decided to forgo the shelves toward the front, her sights snagging on the darker, more private rows tucked away in the far corners.

She drifted closer, itching to dive in. Rows upon rows, hidden in the quiet spaces of the library. She cast one last look toward the door, the sole entry and exit. She would have to be quick and vigilant.

"I can do this," she breathed, giving a resolute nod of her head.

The hem of her cloak fluttered behind her as she allowed the towering shelves and shadows to envelop her.

The billowy sleeves of her cloak fell to her elbows as she reached up to pluck a book from a high shelf.

It was heavy in her hands, the spine cracked with age, and the cover worn, lettering faded and unable to be read. The pages crackled under her

touch as she flipped it open, the smell musty and the edges of the paper yellowed with time.

She turned each page with reverence. Most books were enchanted to stay frozen and unmarred by age. For this book to be weathered by the passing seasons was only a testament to its power and time spent bound in leather and tucked on a shelf made of wood.

The hope that had welled up within her was dashed with every page turned. Her shoulders fell in dismay. Words of healing potions or spells to tether life forces to another filled the molded pages.

Useful to some, she was sure. But not for her.

She didn’t need a healing spell and had no one she wished to tether her life to.

Luella put the book back and picked up another one. This one pulled from an even higher shelf—so high she had to teeter precariously on a stool to tug it from under the stack it was in. She flopped down on the ground, book in her lap while her cape pooled around her thighs as she leaned back on her hands and huffed a sigh.

"I guess it wouldn’t be so easy, would it?" she whispered in the moonlit library, as if she were asking the books for an answer to the questions that plagued her.

She cracked the new book open—another aged tome—and leafed through the pages with soft touches and trembling fingers.

"Elemental training. Temporarily take the sight of the mage so that they may be better in tune with the elements and work to focus on the magic around them, as well as within them…" Luella mumbled under her breath, curious at the information, but it wasn’t what she was looking for. She turned the page.

As she skimmed the pages, the passage of time made her movements more hurried, too aware of the pounding of her heart inside her chest and the careful silence in the room. She could not be discovered here. "Necromancy. Certainly not." Luella slammed the book closed. "Are all these books about the mages and spells?" she once more asked the silent room.

The only answer was the faint bubbling of water as it pooled into the fount.

She got up and dusted off her knees from the faint coating of dust that had blown from the covers of the books and untouched shelves. Looking

about the room, she cast a glance upward to the skylight—the moon was still high, it was the peak time of night. But she still wanted to be back in bed soon. Just in case.

Every moment was one of stolen freedom and jittery nerves, fearful of being found out.

The King was neither a patient male nor a fair ruler. Luella shuddered at the thought of what he would do to her if he found out she had left her room by herself.

She walked further into the alcove of old books.

Perhaps the important ones were further back…

As towering shelves closed around her, a chill settled over her skin. The light of the moon was cut off this far in the maze of tall bookshelves and hidden walls, and she lifted her chamberstick in front of her to illuminate the way.

"Wow." Her breath puffed before her, and a shiver wracked her frame, making her pull the cloak tighter around her shoulders.

Dust shimmered in the faint, warm light from the candlelight, flickering flames casting ghastly shadows, stretching her own shadow tall and thin across the floor. Spires of bronze and gold were set into the walls, adornments that spoke of the castle’s regality. Tall statues stood along corners, perfectly sculpted beings frozen into the marble. She held the candle closer. She didn’t recognize any of the beings the statues were modeled after. A collection of males and females alike. None had arched ears, but all had deadly visages, even through the stone in which they were carved, it was easy to tell that these beings were not to be trifled with.

Her lips parted in awed curiosity. She brushed back the hood of her cloak so she could see more clearly, growing annoyed by the thing. It was slightly big for her frame, but she would not dare remove it.

The statues must be…

"Rulers of Serpentis," Luella mused.

To look upon the aristocracy of the shifter kingdom was not her reason for being here, even as interesting as it was. With her tutors, she had never delved into the history of the varying nobility of the far-off kingdoms. Her knowledge-hungry mind itched to study them and learn of their lives.

Her fingers elegantly danced along the cool marble of a sculpted cheekbone.

Had they been as brutal as the current ruler?

Luella swept her sights away from the statues, trailing by tall stacks of books—so tall she worried at the slightest whisper of wind, they may topple over and crush her to death. With every step further into the maze of shelves, she noted how the air grew impossibly thick. It tickled against her nose, and she stifled the urge to sneeze.

Magic. The air was teeming with it.

The books were even older back here. So old, some of them had vines and green moss growing from some unseen place in the shelves, wrapping around them and mingling with the dust motes coated to the shelves and against their covers.

Her curious perusal was paused as a faint rustling noise pierced the still air.

Luella froze, chamberstick held aloft and one foot outstretched, poised for her next step, as her breath caught in her chest.

Waiting for the noise to sound again, her ears strained in the quiet.

There!

Once more, a faint rustling noise. A sound akin to the rustle of leaves against a forest floor. Luella placed her feet down carefully, moving closer to the source of the noise. It seemed to be coming somewhere from within an especially tall stack of aged tomes. Nudging one of the books away with the tip of her finger, she peeked in the shadowed recesses of the shelves.

And there, she saw it.

A tiny figure, barely the size of her palm, perched upon one of the stacks of books, legs swinging to and fro, gazing up at Luella with sparkling, verdant eyes.

A sprite.

Luella had never seen one before. Even with sprites being native to no particular kingdom, she had never before seen one of the little winged creatures with her own eyes.

She jerked back, holding the chamberstick in front of her as if she could use it as a weapon.

A small and teasing thought welled up inside her mind: *as if the little sprite could possibly pose harm?*

The creatures were known to be gentle-spirited. She prayed that rang true, while mentally combing through the information she remembered reading of the creatures…

Sprites could be found in any of the elements—Ignis sprites tended to make their homes near fire; Aer sprites in the mountains; bodies of water were typically where the Aqua sprites gathered; and Terra sprites in forests.

This sprite had wings of gossamer silk and hair spun from the same shade as evergreen leaves. A dress made of tree bark covered shimmering, brown skin. A faint coating of leaves fell as the sprite’s head cocked to the side in thought.

"You’re not supposed to be here." The sprite’s voice was light and musical, with a feminine lilt.

"S-sorry," Luella stuttered, holding the chamberstick up so she could see better.

The sprite let out a squeak, a tiny hand covering her eyes. "Do you mind?" It was a hissed demand, the sprite waving away the fire of the candle like she wished to put it out.

"Oh. I’m sorry." Luella placed the chamberstick on a nearby shelf, careful not to put it too close to any books. The light cast her and the sprite in a cover of deep shadows, and Luella’s brow furrowed as she struggled to make out where the tiny creature was sitting.

"Is that all you can say? *Sorry*?" The sprite’s tone was laced with a soft, teasing nature, wings rustling and covering the shelves in more leaves.

Luella swallowed the insane urge to laugh. She hadn’t laughed in… well. It had been some time.

"You shocked me," Luella explained. "I didn’t expect anyone to be in here at this time of night."

"Me either. Why are *you* here?"

"I’m looking for some books. I couldn’t sleep." Luella decided to share a small version of the truth. Honesty was always the better choice when possible so she wouldn’t be outright caught in a lie. "Stories help calm me."

She didn’t focus on how easily her words came. She had been forced to be a stuttering, broken thing around the King and his court. But something about this small creature, this tiny, darkened space—it made her tongue feel looser and her spine straighten with confidence.

"Me too!" The sprite perked up, waving a faintly glowing hand around her. "I love books. All types of books. Books about romance. Books about travel and adventure." As the sprite spoke, she stood and hopped along the covers of the books, hands fluttering before her in excitement.

Luella bit her lip to hide a smile.

"Do you… Do you think you could help me find some books?" Luella hedged.

The sprite twirled. "It depends on the type. Master Tharen tells me not to let anyone near his spellbooks. He can be so stingy sometimes. I ruined the cover of *one* book with my vines, and he never let me touch them again!"

"Master Tharen?" Was it possible this sprite belonged to the mage?

"Yes. Master Tharen saved me. I was all alone in the woods. I almost got snatched up and eaten by a wolf shifter. My tree had fallen, and I didn't have anywhere else to go. It was night, and I couldn't see. I was so scared." The sprite shuddered, tiny hands clenching her arms as she hugged herself. "Master snatched me right up and killed the wolf with his magic. He's a very strong master. I'm glad he saved me." The sprite beamed up at Luella, showcasing slightly pointed teeth, her little chest was heaving from her words. She had barely taken a breath between them.

It was a lot to digest.

How could the Tharen she knew—cruel and insane—save such an innocent creature?

Luella's mouth parted in thought, questions niggling at her. She spoke carefully, though. She didn't know if this sprite would report back to the mage. But Luella was too deep to back out. "Do you have any other masters?"

"No, only Master Tharen. King Vale comes to see me sometimes. He likes to read the boring books. Politics and such. Once, I tried to give him one of my favorite romances, and he never read it." The sprite gasped, flitting forward with the beat of her wings. "Will you read it?"

"Yes," Luella replied. "If you help me, we have a deal." She prayed this would work.

The sprite hummed in thought. "What kind of help?"

Luella wasn't sure *what* she was looking for exactly. History, politics, anything that could help her better understand King Vale and the secrets she knew he was hiding. "I need to find a book on history. Serpentis history. Anything arcane. Even older than these," Luella said, gesturing to the aged tomes around them. She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping the sprite wouldn't ask why some mysterious, cloaked female would be searching for arcane history books in the dead of night.

The stories of sprites being naive and gentle could work in her favor.

The sprite nodded, rubbing a small hand through her hair, the ends brushing her dainty shoulders, and she turned her head to look further into the towering maze of shelves before looking back to Luella with sparkling, verdant eyes.

She hummed, before saying, "How can I help you if I don’t know your name? I’m Nyxila. But you can call me Nyx. Master Tharen does." The sprite extended a small hand out to her, and Luella touched her tiny hand with the tip of her finger in greeting.

Luella paused, her name on the tip of her tongue. Maybe it would be best not to share it. Just in case Nyx knew of Solis and held some grudge—it seemed everyone she had met thus far did. "I’m Lu."

Her heart seized at the name, at the memory of the demon who had given it to her.

She was doing this for Az. And for herself. To save them both.

With an impish grin, Nyx hopped off the stack of books. Twin dimples appeared on her cheeks, and Luella tried not to coo at the sight. "It’s a deal then, Lu. Come with me." Nyx flew through the shelves, wings beating behind her, barely giving Luella any time to follow.

Luella picked up her chamberstick, careful to keep it away from the sprite.

"How do you know Master Tharen?" Nyx asked, flitting about the shelves at such a pace it was hard for Luella to keep track. Every time she thought she had the sprite in her sights, Nyx popped up somewhere else.

Luella ducked under a thick tangle of vines that crawled between shelves. At least now she knew the source—sprites were connected to the elements, similar to the face, but could barely wield any magic besides growing flowers, twirling water in their hands, tiny sparks of flame, or conjuring up whirlwinds of air and puffy white clouds. Nothing harmful.

"Why do you think I know him?" Luella asked, a shiver wracking her frame the further she ventured, the magic thick as it pressed down on her shoulders. It was too cold.

The maze of shelves seemed to never end. Enchanted, no doubt.

Nyx huffed and perched on a nearby shelf, legs swinging. It put her at eye level with Luella, and she avoided the verdant gaze of the sprite.

"You looked odd when I mentioned his name." For such a small creature, Nyx was rather intuitive and sharp.

"I do know him," Luella said. "But not… well." She couldn’t admit the mage had captured her, not without alerting the sprite that Luella wasn’t exactly here in Serpentis by choice.

Nyx hummed, pointing toward a little passageway nestled between three shelves; it was small, and Luella had to duck to enter it, turning her body sideways to fit.

"I bet he likes you," the sprite said.

Luella stumbled, thighs scraping against the shelves. "What makes you say that?"

"How could he not? You’re very pretty. Master Tharen always likes the pretty ones. Once, I went to his room to give him a book he asked for, and I caught him in his bed with *three* pretty shifters—they weren’t as pretty as you, though."

Luella blushed.

She was saved from responding to *that* particular piece of information when Nyx stopped, wings beating like a hummingbird as she splayed open her arms. "Here we are."

Here seemed to be a small enclosure, trapped between rough, stone walls and shelves stuffed full of books. It was dank, and dust particles floated in the light coming from the candle. The air smelled old like no one had been here for a very long time. Vines curled around the floor, and she stepped carefully in the few clear spots she could find. Teetering, Luella placed a hand on the wall to steady herself. It was slippery with slime and green goo that almost looked like algae. She wondered how water could mildew the walls if the only source was the small waterfall and pool, far away toward the front of the library.

She inhaled, nose tingling as she scented the air with her less-than-stellar fae sense of smell. Petrichor and brine. Like rain and the salty sea combined. There must be a source of water around.

Luella fingered the slippery algae on the walls, her cloak shrouding her peripheral as she peeked at Nyx. "Is there water around?"

"There’s a network of tunnels and caves underground. They used to be dragon dens and snake pits many moons ago, but some still use them to store their hoards. There are little passageways tucked all over the kingdom, some are known, others not. There have been stories of shifters falling into the holes and disappearing." The sprite shivered in fear, leaves falling around her as she shook her tiny head. "Master Tharen tells me to be careful

going deep into the library, says there are passages in here. That’s why I don’t come this way a lot."

The sprite was a well of information, and Luella was grateful.

A tiny glimmer of a plan sparked. Maybe if she could find the passageway, she could use it to escape.

Luella would rather risk being trapped in the tunnels than spend the rest of her days in captivity.

Better to die free than live caged.

"These caves. Have you seen one?"

Nyx hummed in an affirmative, an elegant finger stretching out to point to a particularly high collection of shelves, the books held within teetered precariously, thick cobwebs clinging to the sides of the shelves and attaching to the wall. She craned her head up, up, up, watching the faintest tendrils of her firelight seep into the darkness, catching the dust motes floating in the air.

Luella followed the direction of the sprite’s finger but saw nothing. Her mouth popped open, ready to question her, but Nyx pressed a tiny palm to her lips, drifting in the air as her legs kicked out.

"Stay away," Nyx implored. "There." Her arm was still outstretched.

"There’s…" Luella grew wary. "One of these tunnels is nearby?"

"Yes. Hidden behind that shelf. I hoped you wouldn’t stumble upon it." Nyx held both hands before her, a shudder wracking her small frame, leaves drifting around her shoulders. "Please stay away from it."

"Is it dangerous?"

The sprite shook her head. "It’s cold. The chill seeps into your bones. Better to stay away. So long as we do not mess with it, I don’t think anything—or anyone—will mess with us."

That was… Luella bit her lip so hard she tasted the slightest tang of iron. Her eyes grew wide as she cowered away from the towering shelf. Those tomes held within its midst suddenly the only thing keeping her safe; a barrier of paper and ink.

But—

"You have never ventured into it?"

"Never," Nyx harshly said.

On trembling legs, Luella pressed a hand to the stone wall. Her steps were unsteady and hesitant, and with a bated breath, her fingers curled into

the side of the bookcase. Dust tickled her nose, and the air was chilled with a heavy stillness.

"Lu," the sprite whispered. "What are you doing?"

Luella ignored her, and slowly, she peeked around the corner of the shelf. She didn’t know what she thought she would see. Wraiths spilling out of dark corners, an opened maw of shadows, or bony hands reaching out of nothingness… But what Luella saw was none of those things.

A small, seemingly inconsequential hole was cut into the stone walls. It was thin and short but still larger than her. It looked almost like an entryway without a door, leading to nowhere. Or everywhere.

Icy tendrils of air swept out of the depths of the cave, kissing her cheeks and mingling with her golden curls. The scent of pine trees and sea salt brushed against her skin, and she inhaled deeply.

It smelled like freedom.

The corner of her lips curved up into a soft smile.

And Luella knew what she must do.

The sprite had grown quiet in her anger.

After Luella had drawn away from the sight of the cave, tamping down her smile and turning it into a thing of unease, Nyx had huffed and grumbled, calling Luella all sorts of things.

She had ignored it all, hiding her tiny laughs of amusement behind her palm. The sprite was adorable when she was mad.

Luella pulled a book from a nearby shelf. It was thin, yet so heavy she almost dropped it. The pages fell open, but no words were written. It was blank. Luella turned the page, only to find the same on the next and the next. Nothing.

"All of these are enchanted. Be careful. Those have teeth," Nyx said, inclining her head toward a smaller collection of leather-bound books. As Luella looked, she swore she almost heard a growl emit from them. Luella scooted away.

It was as she pulled out another book, she felt it.

A tug coming from deep within her gut—the same place she cursed almost every day, that magicless pit that had caused her so much angst ever

since she had been a babe.

Luella followed that tug, ignoring Nyx's curious eyes as she crouched, hands and knees against the damp, stone ground as she peered at the very bottom of the shelf. From this close to the ground, the smell was odious. Her nose twitched, and she held her breath.

None of the books had words on the spines. Sometimes, words simply weren't enough. So Luella was left to follow that pull in her gut as her eyes swept over the empty spines.

One in particular—a muted purple cover with etchings of rosy gold swirling over the side—caught her attention. Luella hesitantly pulled it from the shelf. With thoughts of sentient tomes and gnashing teeth made of paper and leather, trepidation sank into the marrow of her bones; tingles shot up her palm as she gripped it. Luella sat back on her heels, resting the closed book on her lap. It was small and short. The cover was as pretty as the spine. The edges, gilded with metal borders.

Without warning, the cover opened, and the pages flipped like ghostly hands were turning them. Luella gasped, looking up at Nyx, who was already watching the scene unfold with rapt attention.

"It likes you." The sprite cocked her head.

As quickly as it had begun, the turning of the pages stopped, revealing a singular page with words written in a looping scrawl.

"Handwritten?" Luella mumbled. It must be a journal of some kind…

Following along with her finger, Luella read the first line. '"The Umbra will not stop. No one can save us now. I cry for the lives of my fallen companions. All I seem to do these days is grieve and fight. When will it ever end? They grow closer every day. *He* and his shadowed army advance even now while I lay tucked in bed, desperate for dreams to take me somewhere else. I don't know how much longer we can—'" The words stopped there, as if the writer had given up all hope mid-thought.

Umbra. That word again. The same word that she had overheard Graves and Bastian say.

'"He and his shadowed army of Umbra,'" Luella repeated. Fingers trailing over the page, she took note of how the line was written darker than the others, as though the author had born down against the page with their quill in anger.

Luella looked up and froze when she saw the expression on Nyx's face. The sprite looked terrified, verdant eyes wide and hands fluttering before

her.

"I can’t," Nyx revealed. Before Luella could stop the sprite, she disappeared between the shelves, leaving a cloud of fallen leaves in her wake. And Luella was all alone.

By the sprite’s strange behavior, Luella’s suspicions were confirmed—something was going on.

She stood, weighing the journal in her hands, the metal borders poking into her palm from how tightly she gripped it.

This *Umbra* seemed to be at the heart of whatever was going on, whatever secrets were being kept.

Tucking the book in the folds of her cloak, Luella left the way she came, chamberstick held before her as she slipped away from the shadowed corners of the maze of books and back into her room.

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A WELCOMED PUNISHMENT

Golden dust coated Luella’s arms and the backs of her hands, mingling with her golden curls and the freckles on her cheeks. The throne room glittered, filled with so much life that she felt listless and near-empty in the face of it.

Her breath hitched as she looked up. Somehow, it was all even more breathtaking than usual.

Swaths of red and gold adorned the area, tapestries and fluttering drapes pulled half-shut to let in scant amounts of starlight from outside the walls of the castle. The light of the moon was muted, a waning crescent with sharp points. A thin sliver in the inky sky.

"Don’t dawdle, pet," Bastian called from ahead of her. The long, silver earrings dangling from his ears caught the light as the vampire turned his head. His black hair was styled away from his forehead as usual, exposing the refined and almost delicate features of his face.

Swirls of small, black ink filled his pale skin like he was a canvas. It made him alluring and deadly—and everyone in the room knew it. Hungry eyes trailed after him, almost as much as they did her.

The vampire’s grip tightened on her chains, and he pulled her across the dusted marble floors. Her bare toes scraped against the corner of the lush carpet that led to the throne. With a lowered head, Luella scanned the length of it, all the way to the very end.

King Vale was already seated tonight. His crown sat perfectly upon his golden hair, and his green eyes shone like beacons from across the room, boring into her. He reclined against the high back of his throne with a casually regal mien—he never had to try hard to don the persona of a feared and cruel being. It seemed to come easy to the King. And this ease was evident in the way in which he commanded the room without even saying or doing anything.

King Vale inclined his head toward her, and Luella gulped.

What if he knew about her late-night foray into the library and the book that was currently burning a hole under the mattress in her room where she had hidden it?

Ever since Luella had woken up from an evening nap to find Ina and Osa sweeping into her room to dress her, Tharen trailing lazily behind Bastian, who led a chained Az into her room, fear had gripped her. As Bastian had looped the chain around her wrist, she had watched Tharen with bated breath, waiting for him to punish her—or say something, at the very least. Even her nap had been haunted by nightmares of the mage storming into her gilded cage, dragging her from bed, and throwing her back down into the dungeons. For good, this time.

But it seemed Nyx hadn't said anything. Luella could kiss the sprite's tiny feet in thanks for it. She vowed to follow through on her end of their bargain and read the sprite's favorite romance—which had conveniently been on her bedside table when she had woken up earlier that day from her nap.

A warm touch made her focus on the present. On the King awaiting her. And the demon by her side.

Az settled his shackled hands above her hips, her back exposed almost completely by the sweeping, low cut of her gown. A beautiful and simple thing, tonight's gown was a ruby red shade, almost identical to Bastian's unbuttoned coat or the faded swirls on the sides of Az's pants.

The dress was thin, with a slit only up her right thigh this time, and her bare arms pebbled with bumps from the chill of the room. Flickers of shimmery dust fell to her arms and coated them with a faint sheen of iridescence, only adding to the ethereal fashion of her look, offset by the deep shade of her gown and her lips rouged to match.

Her hair was simple, sweeping down her back in golden curls. The ends of which Az brushed with the tips of his fingers, making Luella shiver with

awareness.

Bastian tugged once more on the delicate chain that tethered her to him. He had a teasing lilt to his voice as he said, "Come, don’t make me say it again. Or better yet, do. I can’t be held responsible for how I punish you… I think it would be a welcomed punishment."

The shiver that wracked her frame this time wasn’t from the soft brush of a wanted touch but unadulterated desire mixed with the sharpest tang of the unknown. An emotion she had never experienced before, and Luella didn’t know how she felt about it.

She had the craziest urge to dig her heels into the ground and see what Bastian would do. Shoving that wild, intrusive urge from her head, Luella picked up her pace, gliding through the parted bodies of the court, Az trailing behind her like an indomitable guard.

"I’ve got you, Lu," Az murmured behind her.

She melted at the quiet promise laced within his words.

"I know," she replied. And she did.

Intrinsically, Luella knew. Even without the blood oath binding him, she knew the demon would give his life for hers without a second thought.

Bastian huffed a sigh, and without seeing his face, she could tell he would be rolling his eyes at their exchange. Fine. Let him underestimate their bond. It would only serve her all the better when she escaped and took the demon with her. They would never expect it.

When Bastian made his way to the shadowed alcoves of the room, Luella grew perplexed. The vampire had surprised her by taking her to a place where she would be kept out of sight, as opposed to showing her off blatantly as she had expected. It was wholly at odds with his ostentatious manner. She had speculated Bastian to be front and center, lounging on some couch with her kneeling at his feet.

Stopping at one of the alcoves, Bastian held back the fluttering canopy that closed off the space, keeping it even more intimate.

"After you," he said, standing to the side to allow Luella to go before him. Her shoulder brushed against his side as she entered.

Sconces lined the walls, candles lit with warm flames casting an amber hue over the small space. Az entered closely behind her, and she tried not to cower as Bastian let the curtains fall, closing off the room entirely save for the tiniest sliver where the two pieces of fabric met in the middle. Long, plush benches lined the walls, covered with many pillows and a few blankets. She watched as Bastian lifted a pillow and propped it up on one of the seats, fluffing it until he seemed satisfied.

The air was thick with tension and grew thicker still when Bastian stood before her and settled a cool, heavy palm on her bare shoulder.

"For you." The vampire gestured to the cozy spot he had made, nestled against the wall, pillows and a soft blanket draped over the bench.

"T-thank you." Luella’s cheeks warmed at the gesture.

He nudged her to sit, and she sank into the plushness of the pillows, pulling her knees up to tuck under her. Hands fidgeting in her lap, her chains clinking, she looked up at the two males towering over her. Az—with the thick collar around his throat, bare chest gleaming in the warm light, and shackles around his wrist, looked the part of a prisoner.

But Bastian… The vampire was sinful and wicked, plush lips red and black hair mussed, like someone had run their fingers through it. She wouldn’t be surprised if it were true, he seemed to love his trysts.

The vampire almost threw himself back on the plush pillows, his thighs spread and arms stretched out, the collar of his shirt revealing alluring hints of the swirling floral tattoos etched into his pale skin. The fingers of one of his hands tickled against her bare shoulder, and his clothed thigh pressed firmly against hers. Luella held her breath and attempted to scoot away but didn’t have much room with how her other side was nestled against the wall.

"Az?" Luella questioned with a shy look up at the demon from under her lashes. With how much space Bastian took up, Az had nowhere to sit.

Bastian sighed, curling his fingers firmly around her shoulder and pulling her into his unnaturally cool body. With his other hand, he gestured to the few pillows that had been knocked to the ground and said, "Kneel, Azgorath. Be grateful I’m kinder than Tharen and allow you a cushion."

The demon let out a growl, lips curving up, even as he obeyed and knelt, knees dimpling against a plush, maroon cushion. His shackled hands loosely gripped Luella’s ankles, and he curled his body toward her as close as he could get.

Luella didn’t mind the demon being so close, but she hated him having to kneel. His head was nearly in her lap. And his scent of burnt sugar and melted sweetness made her mouth water. The end of his horn poked her thigh, and she stroked a gentle finger down the side of it, feeling the ridges and bumps under her fingertip. Az grumbled and pressed himself closer to her, insistent. She hesitantly lifted a small curl of his dark brown hair between her fingers, her mouth parting as she luxuriated in the softness, in his nearness.

"That feels nice." Az rumbled a deep sigh of satisfaction, and Luella felt her stomach flutter with the beat of a thousand butterfly wings. She tucked her thighs closer to her, a strange desire kindling low in her belly.

With a soft exhale, she tilted her head back against the wall, watching Bastian from the corner of her eyes as she tangled her fingers completely in the kneeling demon’s silky curls.

Bergamot on one side and rich, sugary cocoa on the other. Luella breathed in deeply, the tension in her limbs unraveling like she had drank and smoked herself into a narcotized stupor with the many wines or cigars filled with heady Rys the courtiers were indulging in.

"You like this," Bastian breathed from her side. He moved closer, his nose pressing into the top of her hair as he breathed her in, just as she was doing.

"No," Luella replied breathily. "I’m not one of the courtiers that trip over their feet to fall into your bed chambers, Bastian."

This small space was making her words flow free, unfettered with confidence. She was drunk off of them both.

The vampire smirked. He knew all too well the words Luella spoke were a fragile lie—both to him and to herself. She barrelled on, a vomitous spill that did nothing to assuage her inward worries or tamp down the male pride curving up his sensuous lips.

"I feel for Az. But not you. You will never *have* me."

At the sound of his name, the demon nuzzled against her lap, careful of his curling horns. She elegantly skimmed over his forehead, smoothing away errant locks, before trailing touches across his forehead and over his temple. His eyes closed, and a sound akin to a purr rumbled from his chest.

Bastian tugged on the ends of her golden hair. The action was a mockery of the way she reverently carded her fingers through Az’s locks.

The vampire was not gentle as he leaned in and whispered, "We've already had this discussion, pet, and it was I who came out on top." His words made a secret smile play upon his lips as if he made a joke. "I'll have you. That is a fact you can bet your life, my life, and even his life"—Bastian jerked his head to Az—"on. If I'm not the first… the second, third, or even the fourth, I will have you. Make no mistake, you'll have no choice but to give in to me. But do not rush because the chase is part of the fun."

His tenor was like silk against her heated skin, juxtaposed with his cool breath and even colder touches against her shoulder and nape. A tantalizing combination that did nothing to rid her of that strange warmth simmering deep inside her.

Without taking his eyes off of her, Bastian reached for a decanter of wine and poured two glasses. One so full, the purple liquid threatened to spill over, and the other he filled less than halfway—that one, he pressed into her hands and forced up to her lips, making her drink with a long, pale finger tipping the bottom up.

The liquid cascaded past her lips in a fuzzy, heady warmth. Coating her tongue with splashes of grape and rich notes of pomegranate.

She was drunk off the wine and him. Both of them.

Bastian and Az.

Soft touches. Charged promises. Bergamot thick, like spiced blood; buttery cocoa, melting on her tongue; fermented sweet wine, like honeyed nectar.

Luella could drown in it.

Bastian groaned, deep and throaty. It was a wholly sensual sound, one she had never heard before, and it made her thighs clench instinctively as he drew the now-empty glass back and wiped her soft lip clean with the pad of his finger.

Az gave another soft grumble—in protest or appreciation, she wasn't sure. His fingers gripped her ankles so fiercely she feared he might leave a bruise. The touches stopped right below her knee, and he acted like he wanted to go higher, touch more, but the way his hands were chained stopped him from doing so, and he let out a growl of frustration.

Bastian chuckled. "Hmm, beasty, doesn't feel so good to be kept from what you're owed, now does it?"

"Cease your taunts, parasitic bastard," Az snarled.

She bristled from the ire within his tone, but her mind snagged on one word Bastian had said.

"You’re not owed me. Neither of you." The intoxication loosened her lips.

Even if she wanted to give herself over to the demon, she wouldn’t admit that weakness aloud in front of Bastian. Not to the King’s Advisor. No telling what Bastian had been sharing with King Vale. And Luella didn’t want the King to realize just how much she had come to treasure her demon.

Az tensed below her fingertips, and she soothed him. Without words, she implored him to read what she wasn’t saying. That she didn’t think she could live without him in this cruel, violent world she had been forced into.

But he would have to remain a secret.

Luella wasn’t strong like him; she wasn’t a fighter. So she would protect him the only way she knew how. Silence.

With the prying eyes and constant watching, Luella hadn’t had a chance to speak with Az in private. She hoped she would get a chance soon. There were so many things she yearned to share, and she sensed Az felt the same.

Bastian delicately swept Luella’s hair to the side, draping her curls over one shoulder to completely expose the other side of her neck. She gulped as he lowered his head, cold breath puffing against her skin as his nose ghosted along her fluttering pulse point. His tongue darted out, and he flicked it along a blueish vein. She shuddered at the feel of it.

Couldn’t decide if it was revolting or appealing.

No, not at all revolting, Luella thought.

Her head tipped back, unbidden, and thunked against the wall of the small, private space—a space that seemed that much smaller with how thick the tension had grown. She was coated in their scents. Every time she inhaled, it wrapped around her like a heavy, woolen blanket, nearly smothering her. Her muscles grew weak, and she was thankful she was sitting because if she were standing, Luella feared she would have fallen to the ground from how heady their combined scents were.

Bastian tsked under his breath before releasing a long-suffering sigh, drawing away from her neck with reluctance as his legs stretched out and his eyes shuttered close.

Relieved disappointment knocked against her, and she took a shaky breath to diffuse the tension.

"Godsdamn it. I can’t do this anymore," Bastian cursed, pinching the bridge of his nose. His eyes were a gleaming red, the brown nonexistent.

The cushions jostled as he stood, and Luella braced her unchained hand under her to stop herself from tilting to the side. Az peered up at her, and she couldn’t read his expression. His amber eyes were dark from the dim light or the cloud of… desire hanging about the room.

The demon rested his chin on her thigh as he gazed up at her. Gently, her fingers still trailed through his soft curls, sweeping them away from his face to expose his rugged features—a nose that was slightly crooked, as if it had been broken and not set right; half-lidded eyes, the natural tan of his skin, and a jawline that seemed a bit more pronounced than she remembered.

Luella vowed to make sure the demon ate before they were forced to leave each other.

Bastian parted the curtains, peeking his head out as he waved over a servant, voice too low for her to make out as he spoke.

"I’ve missed you, my angel," Az said, stealing her attention away from her vampire captor.

Luella looked at him and smiled a soft, pure thing—far too soft for this place. "I’ve missed you."

She bit her lip, contemplating sharing her plans to escape. Peering over at Bastian, she saw he was still occupied, her tethered hand outstretched uncomfortably as the length between them grew taut from their distance.

The thick, unforgiving band of the collar was tugging at Az’s neck, leaving red abrasions from how it was rubbing against his skin. Her lower lip jutted out in a pout at the sight, and she moved her free hand down to skim along his neck, his Adam’s apple bobbing from her featherlight touches as she traced over his hot skin and along the edges of the collar.

Sensing her silence, the fingers along her ankles stretched out, spanning as far upward as he could reach.

"Lu?" he questioned, amber eyes piercing into her golden ones.

Her breath caught at the intensity on his face. Careful of the vampire’s listening ears, she kept her voice low. "Last night, I—"

She couldn’t find it in herself to continue. It was too selfish to tell Az and make him a target. She already had one loose end in Nyxila, and Luella couldn’t stand for the sprite to be put in danger. Or her demon. Az had

vowed to keep her safe with his life, but she wouldn’t allow him to become endangered by her findings.

Not to mention Bastian. She watched the vampire’s lithe back move as he seemed to gesture to the servant, his feet pointed to the side, as if he was still with her, even though he was busy with someone else. Angled like he was listening to her every word, just waiting for a slip-up.

But Az was persistent, sensing something was amiss in her.

Chains clinked as his shackled hands rose, a finger tipping her face down, only for her to be ensnared by his bewitching eyes.

"Tell me," he implored.

She licked her lower lip, mouth dry from the scorching heat radiating from him. He followed the motion, and a blush overtook her, her heart pitter-pattering in that maddening beat that always happened around him.

"Last night…"

Az nodded, patient.

But she just couldn’t.

"I miss you when I sleep at night," she said, words tripping over each other as they burst from her lips.

It wasn’t a lie, but a truth. A diversion from the *real* truth she wanted to share with him.

With a look of pure satisfaction and pride, Az smiled. His hand moved to cup her cheek. The motion was awkward with how the manacles forced his wrists together. He was careful to keep the rough chains from touching her skin as he enveloped her.

She leaned into the touch.

"I miss you always. I miss you even when I’m with you because I know soon, you will be taken away from me," Az uttered.

"Gods, beast, you’ve gone soft," Tharen intoned, holding one side of the curtains away from him as he entered the room.

He only wore one braid in his white hair tonight, and a simple golden chain was threaded through it. With heavy clomps from his worn, dirty boots, he strode closer, the thick tattoos on his neck and chest standing starkly on his skin from how his shirt was entirely unbuttoned.

Tharen fingered the taut length of the chain that stretched from her wrist to the end held in Bastian’s grip. The vampire cast a curious look over his shoulder at them before turning away again. With a rough pull, Luella fell forward, catching herself on Az’s shoulders before she toppled off the

cushions and onto the floor. Her hands brushed against the enchanted iron of Az’s manacles, and it made her skin tingle.

"Hey!" Luella protested, glaring up at the ice-hearted mage.

He merely smirked in reply.

A hand was still stroking over the taut length with wicked glee. Tharen gave another harsh tug on it, and she jolted forward. It appeared he didn’t like how cozy she and Az were becoming.

Luella was loathe to admit it, but she was thankful for the interruption because she had no idea how she would have responded to the demon’s admission. The tension in the room simmered and popped like softly roiling water but did not grow hotter, allowing her to finally take a full breath.

"Take off these chains, and we’ll see how soft I’ve gone," Az growled, lips curving up in a smile, not at all like the soft thing he had given Luella only moments prior, but a menacing threat.

"In your dreams, beast."

Tharen moved then, leaning down to notch his hands under her arms. She bit back a noise of protest, flushing from his proximity—that crisp scent that radiated off of him, all things wintery, freezing the heat in her veins and turning it into a flurry of snow. He bodily lifted her and sat her on the cushions, forcing her to make space as he wedged his large frame down beside her, causing her to sit flush against him, her bare arms pressed into his side. He stole her untethered hand from where it had been on her lap, lifting it to lay over one of his legs as he toyed with her fingers, stretching them out and bending a few so far back she winced.

"Miss me, little lamb?" Tharen drawled. "Those two wouldn’t know how to handle a creature like you. I sense things, *know* things. I can tell from the light in your eyes that you’re intrigued by me. Even more than that, my magic can read you like a book."

At the word *book*, she jolted.

Did he know?

Her fingers trembled in his grasp.

Tharen pressed a flat palm to her exposed chest. Right over her thumping heart. "Your lips may weave lies, but this never will. And neither will my magic of Body. I could hear your heart and stuttered breaths from across the throne room, and as soon as I drew back that curtain and walked in, this"—he pressed his palm firmer to her chest, his nose almost touching

hers—"grew to one, long murmur of a beat. The sweetest music to my ears."

He drew back, and Luella shuddered, her traitorous heart pumping a staccato in her chest, saying all the things she never would admit: he affected her.

A new flush overtook her at the reminder of his heightened senses, the Body magic from his demon ancestry. It was obvious. Of course, it was. But admitting he could hear her heart from so far away…

The Prima was so powerful. Perhaps the most powerful male she had ever encountered. How did King Vale earn his loyalty?

Az bared his teeth. "I'll never let you harm her, Prima. I know what kind of company you keep and what thrills you. Never her," he vowed.

Luella worried her bottom lip. Az wouldn't be able to hold his own against Tharen. Not in his current state, chained with magic. She wondered if anyone could even win against the mage. Tharen's magic of Spirit and Body must be diluted; whereas, Az would have it in force as a full-blooded demon. But the Prima's elemental magic from his fae side… He had such control over it that she feared her demon would not stand a chance.

A murmur of voices broke up the males, both poised to attack. Like the curtains falling back around Bastian as he entered and cast the room in quiet candlelight once more, their ire dispersed. Not gone, but quelled.

For now.

Behind Bastian trailed a female. She was rather pretty, but in a severe way. Not of the rugged sharpness like Az or even Tharen. But this newcomer held a delicate sort of beauty just like Bastian's, cut with a lethal edge. Her eyes were green, pupils slit, and faint scales shimmered on the backs of her hands. As she walked inside, a faint trail of wispy smoke wafted from her nostrils as she breathed—a dragon shifter.

With a short head of dusky blonde curls lining her forehead like a muted halo, the stranger had the look of a warrior angel, tall and toned with lean muscles. Jealousy roiled in Luella's gut at the sight of Bastian's hands settled low on the female's hips, clothed in pure white pants with a matching billowy, snow-white blouse. Luella swallowed the feeling down. She had no claim to the vampire and wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing she felt something for him other than resentment.

Reclaiming his spot beside Luella, Bastian patted a muscled thigh, silently instructing the female to sit. She did so without preamble, almost

jumping to obey as she perched on the vampire’s lap, a tanned hand tangling in Bastian’s black hair as she leaned back against him, shoulders stiff like she feared to disrupt his mercurial nature.

From the way the female shifter was sitting, Luella could see clearly as Bastian nosed along the female’s lithe neck, not at all gentle like he had been with her. One of Bastian’s hands batted the shifter’s touch away, forcing her hands back to her lap as Bastian held them with an iron-clad grip, keeping the shifter on his lap from touching him.

Bastian’s fingers roughly tugged on the dark blonde curls, forcing the shifter’s neck to be completely exposed to the predator with gleaming fangs, just waiting to tear into the awaiting meal.

Luella averted her gaze to the demon kneeling at her feet, something uncomfortable and thick tugging at her gut. Az looked up at her with a set jaw, his anger making her brow furrow in confusion. It was as though he was angry on her behalf. Angry at Bastian’s actions.

Tharen wrapped an arm around Luella’s waist, pulling her further from the pair and into his lap. He still had a tight grip on her wrists, and he roughly settled a hand on her chest, forcing her even closer. His fingers tickled against her collarbone; light touches that distracted her from the strange possessiveness welling inside her.

The intimate position made her head swim.

The scents swirling about the room would have been nice. If not for the interloper currently sitting quietly on Bastian’s lap.

"Do I smell good?" The female asked, back arching as much as she could from how tightly Bastian kept her pinned. The vampire acted like he just wanted it to be over, as though he was merely going through the motions.

The shifter’s voice was steady, not at all like Luella’s. And she felt jealous of her confidence.

Bastian removed his face from where it had been buried in her neck. "No," he murmured without inflection before diving back in.

But this time, with an open mouth, fangs poised to bite as the two points slid into the female’s neck with ease. Blood dribbled over her skin, and Bastian collected it with the tip of his finger, bringing it to the female’s lips and roughly coating them in a scarlet sheen.

It was erotic and angry, and Luella took a shaky breath, jolting as Tharen rubbed a firm hand over her bare thigh, revealed by the slit in her

gown.

The mage leaned down, breathing over Luella’s flushed cheeks. "You like to watch?"

"N-no," Luella stuttered.

"I think you do. Remember, lamb, I can read every shift in your body. I know when you’re scared, content, pleased…" He nipped at her neck. "Excited."

Luella pushed him away with weak hands, and he let go of her reluctantly.

"Leave," Bastian ordered, pushing the female off his lap. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, seeming disgusted.

She staggered away, looking at Luella with a lascivious grin as she licked a drop of maroon blood from her lips.

"Next time, let the Princess join." The shifter’s voice was throaty and filled with intent; she parted the curtains and disappeared into the crowd of revelers.

Az and Bastian’s twin growls followed her from the alcove, and the stranger’s laughs echoed after her.

Tharen’s grip grew possessive on Luella’s hips.

"Why did you have to do that in front of her? Couldn’t you have taken it back to your room?" Tharen spat with disgust.

Az gripped her ankles tightly, thumb smoothing over her skin. He was quiet.

Bastian wiped his lips with the back of his hand again as if he couldn’t stand to taste the female on his lips any longer, smearing drops of blood over his cheek and staining the cuff of his shirt with red. "Couldn’t make it. I needed to feed." His words were stilted, the red in his eyes calmer now as they pierced right into Luella’s soul. "Her godsdamn scent is like an aphrodisiac."

"Fae blood is supposed to be sweet. Sweeter than most," Tharen taunted, fingers tapping on her thigh with agitation.

Az curled his manacled hands into Luella’s calves, fingers tangling with the skirts of her gown. "You won’t drink from her."

"I can drink from whomever I desire." Bastian growled and reached for a pitcher of wine, pouring a tall glass and taking a long sip before speaking again, "And I will drink from her, just not today. Not right now. My body hasn’t caught on yet, so I’m stuck half-satisfied until I can taste her."

"I don’t have a… say in this?" Luella said, exasperated as they talked circles around her.

Two resounding negatives from Tharen and Bastian and a quiet hum from Az was her only reply.

Luella groaned and wiggled off of the mage’s lap and onto the floor, where she knelt right beside Az, who pulled her into him. Her chain tugged at her wrist, and she grimaced from the ache.

Her body curled into Az’s warm embrace like a flower turning to the sun, and she rested her cheek on his bare chest, blowing a breath out between her teeth as she willed it all to stop, if only for a moment.

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PLUCKING PRETTY EYES

"Princess Luella."

The curtains parted, fluttering slightly as they revealed deep shadows and the faintest hint of the reveling court in the midst of the throne room.

Luella perked up at the sight of Graves, who stood rigidly in front of the shut curtains. With a gloved hand, he pulled down his cowl to rest under his chin, leaving his hood where it was.

The soft flickers of candlelight illuminated the surroundings and made the shadowed male into a haunting figure, backlit by sparkling whirls of dust that caught in the threads of light around his black hair. The scar over his left eye curved a harsh and jagged line down to his cheek, the shadows of the room making it more severe. The scruff on his jaw was darker, like he hadn't shaved in a few days. It made him rugged and dangerous.

Eyes of lapis lazuli took in where she was nestled on the floor, Az's manacled hands resting over her shoulder, her back propped up on Bastian's legs, and the unflappable Tharen pulling at the ends of her hair where it rested on his lap, harsh tugs that made her wince every few moments. The room was heady with *them*.

The usually stoic raven shifter huffed a breath, nostrils flaring.

Did the scents in the room make him dizzy, too?

Because Luella was overcome by how delicious the cozy room had become—rich sugar and crisp snow and spiced bergamot. Her head felt too

heavy to hold up from the intoxicating blend.

She was too overcome to realize how abnormal it all was.

Graves rested a hand on the hilt of the sword daggling off his hip. "King Vale has requested a dance." He held out a gloved hand in offering for her.

Frozen, she stared up at him, not wanting to leave this small, private space.

"Must I?" she asked.

Luella could've sworn the edge of the male's scarred lip quirked up in the beginnings of a smile.

"Yes," Graves replied. "Let's not keep him waiting."

Tharen hummed. "Right. You don't want to do that, Princess. You haven't seen the worst of King Vale's fury. There's nothing the male hates worse than impudence. Dragon shifters are known for their lack of patience." He tugged on the ends of her hair, forcing her to crane her neck back and look up at him from where she was kneeling on the floor.

Luella's cheeks heated at the exposed position, she was practically bent backward over his and Bastian's laps.

The mage patted her cheek in a patronizing gesture before shoving her away from him. Luella was caught by Az with a hand against her lower belly, his thumb lightly brushing against the space below her navel absentmindedly.

With his manacled hands still secured around her waist as best as he was able, Az helped her to stand, pulling her back into his chest. The length of the chain between them and Bastian grew taut, and her fingers dangled limply as she waited for the vampire to follow.

When Bastian didn't make a move to stand, Luella inquired, "Are you not coming?"

Tharen huffed a laugh, and Luella looked at him, her mouth popping open in confusion.

"I think I'll allow Graves to take over. I'm in no state to be around you for much longer." Bastian's fangs flashed as he ran his tongue along a sharp point.

Luella felt her heart stutter at the meaning laced within his words: he needed more blood.

The vampire held out the end of the chain, and Graves took it with ease, clipping the end to his belt wordlessly.

"Run along now, pet." Bastian teased as he made a shooing motion with one hand. "When you dance with him, envision yourself in my arms instead." He brought a glass of deep burgundy wine to his lips, the edge of the glass hiding the smirk playing along his sinful mouth.

Before she could think better of it, Luella blurted, "I want you to come."

"Oh, do you?" Bastian grew amused, a dark eyebrow quirking up.

Tharen laughed louder, and Az's hands grew possessive on her waist, a growl bubbling up in his chest.

Luella nodded. She didn't want to be left with Graves. The male frightened her. Not in the same way as Tharen or the King, but it was a quiet sort of deadliness that followed him wherever he went. Only made worse by his voyeuristic proclivities.

Bastian took a moment to think before placing his nearly empty wine glass down and standing. "As you wish," he said, brushing past her as he made to leave.

At the red tinge to his eyes, Luella didn't know if it was the right decision to make or not. Bastian looked like he was nearing his threshold.

"Come," Graves mumbled as he pulled his cowl back over his lower face mid-word.

The raven shifter led her from the safety of the alcove. From behind, Az reached up and held the curtain back, making sure it didn't hit her. The gesture was soft and sweet—just like the demon himself.

While Luella had been tucked away in the alcove, court raged on, growing more raucous with every passing moment. It was a cacophony of discordant sounds. Cheers and yells, pleasured noises and laughter, combined with the soft stringing of a harp. The music was constant.

Az was a steady warmth at her back, and Graves tightened his hold on the chain, pulling her along like some pet.

She couldn't help but cower back at all the peering eyes. Her presence in court was less of a shock now, but that didn't stop the courtiers from watching her every move, drinking her in as their hands reached out to touch. She knew the only thing keeping her safe was the decree King Vale had made. If it weren't for that, Luella would have been mauled by these beasts when she took her first step into the throne room.

Her perusal was cut short by a male with a shock of red hair staring right at her. He was tall and lithe, with the appearance of a dancer of some sort; his muscles fine and trim, neck elegant and posture perfect.

Luella’s dance tutor would have loved him.

He wore a billowy brown coat thrown over a skin-tight, tan shirt. Rubies and sapphires were sewn into the lapels and cuffs of his coat, intermingling with the dust floating about the room. The jewels caught the light and cast rainbows.

"My!" the male exclaimed, hurriedly weaving through the mass on the dance floor and gracefully stopping before her.

Luella started, stumbling to a stop. Az caught her against his chest, towering by her side in protection.

"Back up," the demon snarled.

The male was a respectful distance away, but that didn’t stop him from holding his hands up in front of him to placate Az. "Apologies. I was just taken aback. Everyone’s been talking about you, dear." He looked at Luella, his eyes a stark green shade. There was a smattering of freckles on his nose and the backs of his hands. "I had to see for myself."

Graves sighed and stopped, his posture wasn’t overtly threatening, if slightly exasperated.

"Sartor," Graves greeted, tone bored as he looked at the male as if to say, *on with it*, jaw set into a scowl and foot tapping on the marble floor.

"You have such vivid golden eyes," the male, Sartor, continued.

Luella’s mouth parted; she didn’t know how to reply to that.

Tharen sidled up by her other side, making her throat seize. The mage weighed one of his daggers in a hand as he eyed Sartor with a lazy grin.

"Apologies for her, she’s still learning her manners," Tharen said, shooting forward and gripping Luella’s jaw with force, turning her head to face Sartor. Chains clinked as Az strained against his shackles. "Say *thank you*, little lamb."

She felt a curse well up on her tongue but forced it back down. She wouldn’t stoop to their level and give in to blasphemous notions.

"Thank… you," she all but spat. Her jaw ached from his grip.

Tharen’s finger almost dipped into her mouth as she spoke. She thought vaguely of biting it, but she knew better. Especially with his other hand gripping a dagger. It wouldn’t take much for the mage to arc the blade up and cut out her tongue.

Sartor’s green eyes glinted, and she felt slightly queasy as he stared at her with blatant desire. Ducking her head, Luella pressed her side to Graves, Tharen’s hand falling away. Graves seemed to barely notice her

seeking shelter in him, save for the way he angled his body, half-concealing her behind him.

Sartor made to step closer, and Az pressed against her back, the demon let out a warning growl, and she felt it vibrate through her whole body, shooting little tingles everywhere.

The red-haired male reached out a finger like he wished to touch her face, but before he could, Graves flicked it away, quick as a whip.

"Back away. The King would not like you to be so close," Graves intoned.

Tharen, ever the aggressor, took a more violent approach. "If you know what's good for you, you'll turn away now, Sartor. My daggers have been dry of blood for a day. And that's a day too long. I'm itching to carve that petty smirk off your face."

Az growled in agreement. He had been so quiet; Luella hoped he was okay… Something about this court, these males, made him become resigned and far more territorial. Or perhaps that was his natural state—Luella met him in the quiet privacy of the dungeons, after all.

Sartor held up his hands again, suddenly subdued by the three males standing around Luella like guard dogs. "Sorry, sorry. I'll take my leave now. It was knowing the rumors were true. She *is* absolutely edible." Sartor winked at her, a piece of his red hair curling over his temple as he turned to leave.

Az tensed behind her, poised to strike, his body angled to run after Sartor. Luella knew he would have if it weren't for the chains binding him.

"I haven't seen that bastard in ages. Still as insufferable as ever," Az groused.

The demon was coiled to attack, even though the male had disappeared into the crowd. Luella placed a palm on his lower stomach—to subdue or comfort him, she wasn't sure. He tensed under her, amber eyes heating as they held her gaze.

Tharen walked his fingers along Luella's chain, tone lackadaisical as he said, "He's usually not that brazen. He prefers to take his females unwillingly, so these chains only serve to excite him more. There's something about wanting what you know you can't have." The last part was said quietly as if an afterthought.

"The forbidden is always tempting," Az agreed, placing a hot palm over hers, keeping her hand on his lower stomach. His tanned skin glittered with

the enchanted dust, horns nearly sparkling with it. He was so… pretty.

Graves broke his stint of silence. "About your eyes… That wasn’t a compliment."

"What…what do you mean?" Luella asked him, but the raven shifter merely regarded her impassively, dangling the information in front of her with a taunting shimmer in his jeweled eyes.

With a lazy hand, Tharen pulled an unlit hookah from the passing hand of a courtier, the male rising to fight with a curse and narrowed eyes.

"What the fuck?" the male spat, but his offensive stance wilted as soon as he realized who the offender was. "P-Prima," he stuttered, before scurrying off.

Tharen rolled his eyes as if it were common to take from those he deemed lesser than him. The mage lit the end of the hookah with the wave of his fingertips, flames sparking along the end as he fit the tip between his lips, and he left it to dangle there as he regarded her coolly, keeping a firm point of contact with her. She cowered back into Az, his fingers digging into her side and the links of their shared chains resting over her arm and cutting into her waist.

"Sartor is a dragon shifter. And his hoard?" Tharen answered on Graves’s behalf with a smirk. The mage came closer, a whisper of space between them as he lowered his face to hers. "Pretty eyes."

Luella jerked her hand up to hover protectively near her eyes, and the innocent act made the mage huff a laugh.

Bastian stepped closer to her side and fiddled with the neckline of her dress, fingers skimming under the thin lace as his hands roamed lower and lower with each pass. "He has a thing for gouging out the eyes of his bed partners after he fucks them. You won’t be lying with him, so we don’t have any worries, pet."

Luella’s heart seized, and all the blood pooled to her feet. Her mouth opened and closed as she floundered for what to say to *that*.

A blush overtook her face, and Tharen, the animal that he was, immediately honed in on it.

"Aw," Tharen crooned. "She’s embarrassed. Don’t worry, lamb, that modesty will be done away with in time."

Bastian gripped her shoulder, palm pressed over her breastbone, and fingers dipping under the collar of her gown, his skin cool against hers. She suppressed a shudder.

The vampire leaned forward, lips ghosting over the point of her ear, as he whispered, "Don’t let him think he has the upper hand. Trust me. Fight back." He gave a gentle nip to her lobe. And this time, Luella couldn’t contain the shudder that wracked her frame.

Blame it on the few sips of wine earlier, her nearness to the four males, or the vampire’s words, but Luella couldn’t stop herself from rising to Bastian’s challenge and attempting to play their game…

"What if I want to l-lie with him?" She stumbled over the words, couldn’t bring herself to say that *other* thing.

Bastian went rigid beside her; the red in his eyes grew more pronounced. Tharen bit down on the tip of the hookah so hard the wood splintered, a lone crack radiating from where his teeth ground into it.

"Too far," Bastian muttered in warning.

Az rumbled a growl behind her, pressing tightly to her back, towering over her. He was all hard muscle and warm skin, and his hands settled on her shoulders as he curved himself around her, warning the others off.

"Calm down, Azgorath." Graves eyed the others with a look of contempt. "It’ll take more than a few words to get me to lose control, unlike others." His appearance contradicted his words—gloved fingers tapped against the muscles of his upper thigh, and though she could not see a hint of skin save for his eyes, she had the feeling he was wound up, poised to snap.

Bastian ground his jaw, closing his lids for a brief moment and taking in a slow breath. His lips moved soundlessly like he was counting, then after a few moments, he opened his eyes once more, the red tinge not as vivid, but his shoulders were still rigid with tension.

"As much as hearing you say that makes me want to drag you back into the alcove and show you what it really means to lay with a male, I won’t make a move, pet." Bastian settled his attention on Az. It was then that Luella realized how he acquired his role as the Advisor. He was diplomatic. Ever the voice of reason. "Be at ease, beast. After all, Graves was right—some of us have control."

Tharen’s knuckles turned white as he tightened his hands into fists. The mage flipped up his dagger to press the sharp point into Bastian’s throat. She waited for him to move the blade forward, but as if an invisible hand was holding him back, Tharen didn’t move any closer. Bastian shifted, the blade inadvertently digging further into his neck.

"Are you implying that I don’t?" Tharen seethed.

At the display of violence, the demon at Luella’s back wrapped both arms fully around her chest, the chains rubbing against her arms as he held her. His chin brushed the top of her head, and she allowed herself to melt into his embrace. Protected.

Bastian didn’t even seem fazed that the psychotic and powerful Prima held a weapon to his throat. A finger raised, and Bastian placed it right on the sharp edge of the gleaming blade, held still against his neck. As Bastian moved his neck closer to the edge of the blade, blood welled as it cut into his skin, but he didn’t even flinch. Tharen eyed the droplet with glee. The bloodshed made him joyful.

"Oh, I’m not implying it. I’m stating it. When it comes to the Princess, your scarcely held control is all but naught. I don’t blame you, Prima. When was the last time you had a good fuck? I know when I go a while without a tumble in the sheets, I’m bound to lose control." Bastian’s lips curved up into a full-blown smile, but it was not genuine. He lifted his finger and rubbed the bloody tip of it over his lips, sucking on it. "Having trouble finding someone who wants to lie with you? That’s what happens when you scare everyone off."

"Fuck. You." Tharen dug the tip of the blade deeper into Bastian’s throat, uncaring of the attention they were drawing from the crowd.

The musicians still played, but as if they could hear the tension building to a crescendo, their tunes turned into a thick rhapsody of vexation. Feeding into the mood of the throne room, the revelers grew more unruly and untamed, spurred on by the music and promise of violence, fists flew, and a few glasses shattered on the ground from being thrown.

Luella gripped Az’s arm that was wrapped over her chest. "Az," she implored, biting her lip.

The demon shushed her, and Graves cast her a weary sigh.

"Enough," Graves called.

Tharen ground his jaw, waiting for a beat before wordlessly pulling the dagger back from Bastian’s neck.

Bastian flicked his eyes to Luella, straightening the lapels of his coat with a quiet clearing of his throat. "Sorry you had to see that, pet." He gave one last smile to Tharen and taunted, "I’m sure your ego would have taken a grand hit to lose in front of her."

In a flurry of angered curses, the mage made to lift the dagger again, hands fisting in the collar of Bastian’s coat as he pulled him up.

"Okay, okay. I see that didn’t go over well." Bastian held his hands before him in a mockery of surrender.

"You would be no match to me in a fight, Advisor. Best remember that for when we’re on the training grounds," Tharen growled.

Graves, deadly as the night and silent as shadows, drew a thin sword from the sheath at his side, holding it aloft by the ornately carved hilt as the pointed tip cut between the pair. It made a whisper of sound as he extended it before him, and Luella felt her pulse quicken, head turning to look at the males as they faced off in a battle of wills and over-inflated egos.

Just when she feared they would descend into a brawl, an order echoed throughout the room.

"Enough," King Vale boomed.

The males paused like someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over them, freezing them to the spot.

King Vale stepped into the circle the group had made, placing his hands on Tharen and Bastian’s chests as he walked right into the tip of Graves’s sword. The point indented the silk of his shirt, almost cutting a hole into the fine weave of the fabric. The King paid it no mind, eyes finding Luella where she was pulled in Az’s protective embrace, shoulders quaking with fear at the mix of angered scents and prideful stances.

"Were you planning on whipping out your cocks to compare sizes?" The King sighed and held out a hand for her to take. "Let’s leave these males to their preening. Come, Princess Luella. I believe I’m owed a dance."

Tharen and Bastian broke apart with twin huffs of indignation, but the mage didn’t put his dagger away.

Graves sheathed his sword and clasped his hands in front of him. The dark, silky hood of his cloak slipped forward as he bowed his head in deference to the King and said, "King Vale, my apologies for not stopping them sooner."

The King waved the apology away as the corner of his lips tugged up. "They are not your responsibility."

Graves’s downcast shoulders seemed to think differently, however.

Luella eyed the King’s outstretched hand.

"I do not owe you anything, King Vale," she stated. Az tightened his grip on her shoulders in a warning.

The King merely stood still as stone, hand unmoving as he waited for Luella to comply.

They both knew she would; there was no guessing if she would rebel or fight back. All the fight had been beaten out of her long before she was taken captive. In her youth, any sense of rebellion had been forced out of her before it could even fully develop, shaping her into the meek creature she was today.

Luella’s malleable temperament had gotten her this far—alive, out of the iron bars of the dungeon, and into this gilded cage. Meek, she may be, but stupid, she was not.

A cage was a cage, and just because she was allowed nice meals, warm baths, and some of the luxuries she had at her home in Solis, Luella knew all it would take was one misplaced word or the barest hint of her plans to escape, and she would be right back in the dungeons. For good.

Luella had been playing the game of court and silence all her life, and that’s why she knew when to pick her battles. When to acquiesce and when to rise to a challenge with wit instead of fists, like these males seemed to favor so much.

She looked to King Vale’s outstretched hand, then back up to his face. He did not waver, not even once.

Her golden eyes tracked up the strong rope of corded muscles peeking out of the rolled-up cuff of his shirt, and she followed those impressions of strength to his elbow, up to his shoulder, and finally—*finally*—met the piercing green of his gaze.

"Okay," Luella breathed, placing her palm in his.

The King’s grip was warm as his fingers completely enclosed hers, and he tugged her into him.

"Obedience suits you," King Vale remarked.

Anger surged within Luella, and in an impulsive moment of weakness, she attempted to jerk her hand back. The King’s grip was iron-clad and unyielding, just as he was.

It was no use.

His eyes sparked in delight at the tiny act of disobedience. "So you *can* fight back. Good. I was thinking you would be content with whatever we threw at you."

"I know when to fight and when to yield, King Vale," Luella said, emboldened with her demon still at her back, chained to her.

While she had been wrapped up in a game of wills with King Vale, Graves had given the King her chain, and Az trailed behind her like a dutiful protector. The raven shifter, mage, and vampire were nowhere to be found, dispersed into the room like smoke. Off to do gods knew what.

Bastian to find a willing—or unwilling—blood supply, Luella assumed. Or to fight with Tharen.

She allowed herself to be pulled into the throng of dancing revelers, the crowd easily giving way as their King entered their midst. Courtiers stumbled back from the odd trio: the dragon King, the captive Princess, and her demon protector.

Eyes warmed her back, and she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Graves would be watching her from somewhere. She could not see him, but that did not mean he couldn't see her—she had a sense the male preferred it that way. To *see*, but not be seen. Watch, but not *be* watched.

King Vale had her now, and he could do whatever he wished with her. Luella was merely a passive spectator, unable to object to his wicked impulses if she didn't wish to find herself back underground in the darkness of the dungeons.

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THE FIRST BATTLE PT. 1

The chain clinked like little bells as King Vale delicately spun Luella away from his embrace.

An excellent dancer, Luella thought with no small amount of disgust.

Luella's eyes flicked down to surreptitiously watch his feet, his steps sure and head held high as he folded her back into his arms just as perfectly as he had directed her to spin away.

King Vale was careful of Az, the demon still tethered to her, and in turn, the King, by the length of chain he had wrapped loosely in his fist. Az sulked behind her, not quite close enough to touch but not far enough that she wasn't well aware of his presence. The force of the spin made the very ends of her golden curls flutter about behind her back, brushing against the demon's chest as the chain grew taut between them, then slack as she gracefully fell back into their orbit.

It was strange. A dance with not two, but three.

With a soft brush of his finger, the King tucked a piece of hair behind her arched ear, eyes locked with hers as he held her to him.

"I've heard stories, you know," King Vale started. "Princess Luella Eritrais of Solis, the forgotten and shunned heirus. There was much talk about you, why you never showed your face. When you were younger, everyone brushed it off, assuming you were perhaps sickly. But as the years went by, and still no sign of the coveted Princess of Solis…" The King

clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Some thought you had a tryst with a low-born fae, or even worse, a human, and grew to be with child, leading to your isolation. A few theorized you didn’t inherit the beauty of your parents. Others simply speculated that you were born with a disability."

Luella raised a delicate, blonde brow as she listened to him. It had never been something she had given much attention to—what others thought about her locked away, treated like a stain upon the lineage of Solis.

"But I knew better…" King Vale trailed off, sweeping the back of his hand down her spine before settling it over her lower back, brushing his warm fingers along her bare skin above the curve of her backside.

She inhaled a shallow breath at the touch.

"What about you? What did you think?" Luella asked.

She peered up at him, neck straining as she met his gaze. From this close, she could count the flecks of emerald in his eyes. Little pinpricks of shimmering brightness offset by the deep forest shade near his pupils. Tiny dustings of glitter settled on his cheeks, raining down around them.

Not for the first time, Luella found herself wishing she were here under different circumstances. Not as a captive but as a visitor. She would have loved to relish in the sights and truly enjoy herself, not with fear for her life and every step taken with trepidation.

"I thought the conspiracies about you being born with a disability weren’t far off. But not a disability of the physical or mental sort," King Vale revealed.

While one hand was settled on her lower back, the King placed his other palm firmly over the space below her breasts. Her back straightened at the touch, awareness sparking on her skin, and he leaned in, filling the scant space between them with his scent of burning wood and crackling embers.

She barely noted Az’s warning growl sounding from behind her as the King whispered between them, "A disability of the soul."

Luella jerked back.

He couldn’t possibly know…

Could he?

King Vale pulled away from her, lifting her arm above her as he spun her gracefully. As if by invisible strings held aloft over their heads.

As she turned, she met Az’s amber eyes. The demon’s lips were downturned, a tiny line between his dark brows. His features softened ever

so slightly as their eyes met before she was again pulled back into her captor’s arms.

Luella barely caught the way Az intensely scanned over the entirety of the room, too wrapped up in the male before her to give it a second thought.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at King Vale. The King’s steps were sure as he tracked footsteps in the golden shimmer of the floors, forcing her to follow after him lest her arm be torn away from her body by the chains keeping her tied to him.

"My soul is perfectly well, King Vale," Luella muttered. "But I thank you for being so concerned over me."

"Would you bet your fate on that?" the King retorted.

Something about the way he said that… Fate. It made Luella’s stomach clench in worry.

And that worry was only magnified when King Vale’s green eyes suddenly grew wide in a look she had never before seen on his face—one she didn’t think the King capable of experiencing. Shock.

It started off small, with a whisper, as all dangerous things do.

The ground rumbled under Luella’s bare feet, and she looked down, curious.

"What—?" The word fell from her lips quietly, and a loud, ear-splitting roar cut off the rest of her question.

So loud, she couldn’t even hear herself think.

Luella had never heard anything like it before.

But she had heard stories.

Those stories did nothing to relay the all-consuming fear that washed over her from the sound. Realization struck her.

A dragon.

The roaring grew louder, and Luella clapped her hands over her ears.

Her knees felt weak from the thundering cries of the dragon’s wings. It was so loud she worried her eardrums would rupture.

King Vale placed a hand on her shoulder, urging her to straighten.

She hadn’t even realized her knees had bent under the force of the noise, shoulders curving inward as she was forced down, down, down.

His lips moved, but she couldn’t hear herself. Nothing over that keening cry. A beastly, inhumane thing, declaring death.

From behind her, a warm hand pressed over the side of her head, pulling her into a bare chest and keeping her ears protected.

In a daze, Luella’s head tilted up, and she met Az’s eyes. The demon’s lips were pinched thin, and his head whipped around the room, the muscles in his broad shoulders rippling. He curled his body around her like he could guard her with the sheer force of his presence alone. He was so warm, and her ears hurt. A whimper was pulled from her, and she felt—but didn’t hear—the answering growl from deep in Az’s chest.

The courtiers were utterly still. The bow of a harp hanging limply from a musician’s fingers, the female’s mouth parted in shock as she staggered back against the wall.

From the shadowed edges of the room, as if materializing from thin air, an army emerged, enclosing the circumference of the throne room and completely trapping the revelers within.

A ragtag collection of common creatures. Not soldiers, though some were. An amalgamation of shifters, humans, and mages.

Luella swore she even saw a few fae in their midst. But it couldn’t possibly be true.

No. The shock was making her see things.

Her eyes flicked to the musician again. Luella didn’t know why, but her attention was morbidly drawn to the shell-shocked shifter; the bow in the female’s hand was visibly shaking, the harp discarded against the ground. Luella could see it even from across the room.

The musician was the first to fall.

In the shadows behind the female, a young male crept. He wore a thin, ragged shirt, and blood and dirt marred his youthful face. The candlelight slanted over his features, revealing a shining pit of onyx for his eyes. His mouth parted in a cry, and he raised a blood-encrusted sword, it wobbled in his grip, far too big for his young frame, and he plunged it into the female shifter’s back.

Luella’s legs grew unsteady under her, and if it weren’t for Az, she would have fallen completely to the ground. She clawed weakly at the demon’s hand. King Vale closed in on Luella’s other side, keeping her tightly tucked between the pair. She barely registered the chains cutting into her wrist. It was as though all her senses had shrunk, leaving her with only

one: her hearing. She could do nothing but tremble under the weight of that thundering boom that pierced the air.

As the King and Az pressed tightly into her, she felt rumbles emitting from their chests as they spoke. Then, as quickly as they had moved to cover her, King Vale broke away, Az leaving her just enough to move her head from his chest. His large palms cupped her cheeks, tilting her face up to his.

Maybe she was just used to it now, but the booming noise wasn’t as painful as it had been. She was adjusting, and more sounds were coming back to her.

As cries, pained moans, and wails echoed throughout the throne room, Luella wished she still couldn’t hear.

King Vale anchored both of his hands on her shoulders, stooping to stare into her eyes.

"Go with Azgorath," the King commanded. His voice held no space for a rebuttal.

Luella barely had time to nod before King Vale shoved her back into the demon’s chest. The King unwound the chain from his grip, almost throwing it into Az’s awaiting hands, as he said, "Don’t make me regret this."

King Vale gave Az and Luella one last, pointed look before something that could only be described as extraordinary took place.

The air grew thick with power, and the King tilted his head back and let loose an inhumane sound, tendons in his neck straining from the force of it. Scales black as pitch crawled along his skin. His clothes tore and fluttered in tattered shreds to the ground, his golden crown falling from his head.

Up, up…

And up.

The creature that lived within King Vale grew right before her eyes.

Until no more, stood the male caged within skin and bones, but in his place, a pure onyx dragon.

Luella staggered back into Az, the demon pulling her far away from the sweep of the dragon’s tail, the tips of his pointed wings dragging against the floor and knocking into marbled pillars along the walls. A few pieces of stone fell loose and crumbled to the ground, like mere putty under the dragon’s sheer size and strength.

"Dear gods," Luella breathed.

Her voice sounded warped to her own ears like she was underwater.

The only speck of color on the dragon’s pure black body was those familiar eyes. A shade of green Luella could almost paint from memory.

He was massive.

Now, Luella realized why Solis hadn’t even had a chance of winning against Serpentis.

The dragon gave a mighty roar, tail swiping, and more pieces of wall crumbled. Those large wings flapped as they stretched out, cutting off the light of the moon from the skylight above and casting the throne room in total darkness as he rose higher.

The dragon’s head neared the ceiling, and still, he did not give pause.

He was going to break through the glass skylight.

"Az," Luella breathed quietly. The demon did not move. "*Az*!" she yelled.

A second before the dragon shattered the skylight with a loud bellow, Az completely enveloped her, ripped from his stupor as he forced her to the ground. He almost crushed her to the floor, a strong arm wrapping around her tightly as he hugged her to him, covering her with his body.

Glass rained down from above, large chunks and smaller shards. It fell in her hair and sliced the exposed skin of her arms with tiny, stinging cuts.

She pressed her hands on the floor to hold her weight, and Luella pushed herself up, bucking against the demon who threatened to crush her.

"Down," he hissed into her hair. She could barely hear him over the sound of the falling glass and beating dragon wings.

"No!" Luella twisted her spine, hips pushing back into Az’s as she wriggled to be let free. "You’ll be hurt!"

Didn’t he have any care for his safety? He wasn’t the impenetrable shield he thought himself to be.

He let out a low groan into her hair and rumbled a curse under his breath at her movements.

"Settle, Lu!"

The resonating shatter of the glass petered out; the room was still and quiet, save for the roaring calls of the dragon and the harsh, thundering boom of beating wings.

Slowly, Az lifted away from her, not giving her any time to get her bearings as he pulled her up by the elbow and tucked her into him. His bare torso was littered with small cuts from the glass, tiny shards stuck to the

skin of his upper arms and back. She shuddered, her lower stomach growing tight at the sight of his blood.

The throne room was in total disarray as a battle raged around them.

Bodies were strewn about the room and fists flew, screams echoing in tune with the sounds of twin dragon cries—King Vale and the mysterious dragon.

A female scrambled back on her legs, scales overtaking her as she attempted to shift, but she never made it. Before the shift could overtake her, an assailant ran her through with a sword, nearly cutting her in half. Blood sprayed from the wound, and she fell into a soundless heap on the gore-soaked marble. Just another felled body joining the quickly growing mass of dead courtiers.

Throughout it all, the enchanted embers of the chandelier continued to fall.

"We have to get you out of here," Az called, tone urgent.

He scanned the room with a wild look in his eyes, likely coming to the same realization as Luella—there was no way out if they didn’t want to fight.

It was a miracle they hadn’t been attacked yet, but their luck was running short. The soldiers grew closer to the middle of the room with every passing moment. Closer to them.

Luella’s heart thundered in her chest. "How?" She stumbled back into Az, her whole body shaking like a leaf.

"I’ll get you out, Lu. I swear it on my life." Az carded his fingers through her hair, careful of the chain. The action was delicate and sweet, a momentary reprieve from the harshness around them. He used his grip on her hair to pull her face up to his. "You have to trust me."

Luella gave a shaky nod, and for Az, it was enough.

He started to pull her away. But not to the grand, double doors they had entered through, but the tiny door nestled near the throne, which she knew led right to the dungeons.

Craning her neck, she looked up to the open sky above. The glass dome was ruined. Jagged edges of broken glass at the outskirts of the dome, while the middle was completely gone. The night sky was clear; she could see no sign of the dragons, but she could hear them.

"Come." Az tugged her, but Luella’s bare feet dug into the ground. Glass cut into her feet.

"What if he’s hurt?"

He appeared exasperated at her worry for her captor. "He’ll be fine."

Just when she was going to allow herself to be pulled away, something sparked within her. Luella dove for the heap of tattered clothes on the floor, fingers digging as she pulled the King’s crown free and cradled it to her chest.

She didn’t know why, but she thought King Vale might not like it if he were to lose his crown.

The thought was absurd. She could not justify her reasoning—

But maybe she could use it as some bargaining chip or a way to earn his favor. Every little bit would help.

Az pulled her up by the neckline of her gown. It cut into her skin, but the demon—who usually would never harm a hair on her golden head—didn’t pay her sharp inhale of protest any mind.

Without a second to spare, they were off.

Az expertly tracked a path through the carnage, Luella stumbling after him. He had an iron-like grip on her wrist. The demon’s strides were too large for her smaller legs, and she struggled to keep up. But still, Luella did not say one word.

She tried not to stare too hard at the blood coating his sweat-slicked, tanned back or the small, jagged pieces of glass embedded in his skin.

Luella sent a quick prayer up to the gods in thanks that she was barefoot. It allowed her to have better traction on the floor, and she used it to her advantage, lithely stepping over fallen bodies and hopping over puddles of blood so she wouldn’t slip. Every step made her wince, glass stuck to her heels, but the adrenaline welling within her made it a distant feeling.

Her fingers gripped the chain as Az pulled her with it like a leash.

He didn’t turn, just kept pulling her along, barreling through bodies, both friend and foe, without a second glance. He shoved everyone in their path out of the way with preternatural strength—barely tempered by the enchantments of his shackles and collar that locked his Body magic—but still far stronger than the average creature.

If this was Az with subdued strength, Luella would hate to see him at full force.

He dodged swinging swords and falling bodies, keeping her close to him so he could protect her. Her ears rang from shock. It was all so surreal;

her body did not feel like her own. Golden curls stuck to her nape with sweat, and her head swiveled, watching the path and dodging blood on the ground, staring gape-mouthed at the attackers in the room—the utter violence.

It didn't look like a normal army. It was such a strange mix of creatures, male and female, young and old, virile and weak. Some were skilled in combat and did not die quite so easily. Others were snapped like twigs, not even having a moment to realize death greeted them before a sword was plunged into their stomachs, or a serpent shifter coiled around them and squeezed until blood dribbled out of their mouths and nose.

A muscled female jumped in front of Az, a mighty war cry falling from her lips, teeth gnashing like she wished to bite. Her palms were raised, a rush of water swirling between them as she was poised to hurl it right at them. An Aqua fae.

Her eyes were dark with shadows. Unnatural.

Almost… possessed.

Luella choked out a warning, her breath ragged. With a sweep of his leg, Az kicked out the feet of their would-be attacker, all without barely stopping his pace.

The fae crumbled to the ground.

Az didn't hesitate before driving his heel down right into her windpipe. A sickening crunch resounded, and the female's eyes were wide with shock as she took labored breaths. Her hands clawed at her broken throat, spurts of water flicking from her fingertip as she weakly attempted to save herself.

But it was no use.

The light dimmed from the female's eyes. Those shadows flickered in her irises before growing dull, her body still with death.

Az swept a cursory glance over Luella, just enough to make sure she was unharmed. She gave a nod. And they ran again.

Her feet hurt with every slap against the marble, and her body was worn out. She wasn't equipped for battle or running.

The assailants wouldn't stop. When one was felled, another seemed to pop up in their place.

A hand gripped her untethered arm, pulling her harshly to the side. It caused her chained arm to pull in the opposite direction Az was running, her arm screaming in pain.

Fire ran up her arm, radiating out from her socket.

A choked scream was torn from her lips. Az came to a screeching halt, teeth bared in the beginnings of a snarl as he turned.

Luella was pulled back into a large chest.

"Hello, little heirus." A masculine voice whispered over her hair.

She shuddered.

"Get the fuck away from her right now," Az threatened. The demon was menacing. Large and unyielding. Chest bare and slick with sweat and blood —both his own and from the attackers. His horns curled above his head of dark curls, and his amber eyes shone with deadly intent.

"Or what?" The male asked. With a long breath, a woosh of air blew her hair away from her neck, and he nosed along the skin of her collarbone and under her jaw, teeth scraping as he drank her in. "Gods, good enough to bite. Wouldn’t you say? I could… eat her up." She felt the male smile against her neck.

There was something more to his words.

Luella didn’t feel the prick of fangs against her skin—only blunt, normal teeth—so why would he threaten to bite? Power thrummed as the male kept her trapped with his magic.

"G-get off of me," she whimpered.

Az tugged on the chain, making her arm throb anew. Sparks of fury ignited in his gaze. But he was stuck, unable to help her if he didn’t want her to be harmed.

Fingers dove under the neckline of her gown, and the male who was holding her gripped her with such ferocity she felt like he had the power to tear her in two.

Another soft puff of breath, and suddenly, the air was stolen from her lungs.

Luella gasped, feeble as she clawed against the male’s forearms. She couldn’t breathe.

She couldn’t breathe.

Her mouth opened as she attempted to cry for help, but all sound was stolen from her lips as the male used his air magic on her, robbing her of breath.

Her lungs seized, empty.

Little pinpricks of black spotted her vision, and the sounds of battle and crying dragons grew faint.

A ferocious snarl ripped through her dulling state of awareness. The chain on her hand keeping her tied to Az grew slack, and the golden links snapped as if they were made of clay.

Knees thudding to the ground and shoulder crying out in pain, air rushed into Luella’s lungs as she was released from the male’s grip. Sweet with dizzying relief. She inhaled greedily, gulping down so much her chest ached.

She gave a weak cough, sounds coming back to her in a rush as she gained her bearings.

"*Run*! Lu, run!" Az barked at her.

Through wavering sight, she watched as the demon fought the male who had hurt her. His hair was cut closely to his scalp, displaying arched ears. Thick, black tattoos were etched onto the side of his skull, and it reminded her of Tharen. A mage.

Hands scrambling for purchase against the blood-slicked floor, Luella stood, careful not to move her aching shoulder.

The loose end of her chain dangled from her wrist. Az had snapped the links, untethering her and leaving him to freely battle her attacker.

The demon kicked at the male with his bare foot, using the shackles and chains to his advantage as he hooked them against the male’s neck and pulled back on them tightly. The male choked, eyes bulging as the air was stolen from him just as he had done to her.

"Hide," Az screamed at her, muscles in his neck straining as he strangled her attacker to death. The male’s feet kicked out, body slowly slumping as Az didn’t let up.

She jumped to obey.

Her knees felt wobbly and head light with fear as she slipped on the floor, diving into a nearby alcove.

And Luella was enveloped by the shadows and quiet.

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THE FIRST BATTLE PT. 2

She pressed her back against the wall, knees pulled to her chest as she cowered like the weak heirus everyone thought her to be.

The chain fell over the clammy skin of her arms and chest as she held her hands firmly to her ears, blocking out the screams. The cries. The clanging of swords and the sounds of battle.

She wasn't used to this violence. Didn't know the first thing about it.

Luella felt like she might throw up the measly amount of food in her system.

Books can only offer so much wisdom. And none of the war stories and adventurous tales she had read could have prepared her for… this.

And she knew this battle was but a mere drop of the real horrors war could hold. For all their perseverance and might, the attackers didn't hold a chance against the savagery of Serpentis.

The soft padding of footsteps broke up the sound of her labored breathing.

She clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her breaths, far too loud in the small space—a dead giveaway of her hiding space.

"Come out, come out, little heirus." A voice taunted in a low, almost friendly, whisper. "I won't hurt you," the speaker promised.

As if she would believe him.

Luella pressed her back more firmly against the wall, eyes squeezing shut as she prayed and prayed.

She was sitting underneath a small table, the space so tiny that she barely fit. Her knees ached from how close she was pressing them to her chest, contorting her limbs to fold as small as possible. Her shoulder wouldn’t stop throbbing, a constant and persistent, burning pain.

The male gave a low chuckle, and one by one, the dim candlelight in the alcove went out. A small trickle as the flames puffed out of existence like they had never even been lit in the first place.

It cast the alcove in total darkness, and Luella’s heart came to a dead stop in her chest as the sound of footfalls grew closer, stopping right before where she was hiding.

Booted feet and the edges of the male’s legs shimmered in the darkness, barely perceptible in her periphery.

Ghostly pale fingers gripped the edge of the table. Then, ever so slowly, the male leaned down, breath almost as jagged as hers. A blood-splattered, pale face peeked under the table, lips curving up into a wicked grin. Shadows were in his eyes.

She screamed, a choked, muffled cry. It only seemed to excite the male more.

"There you are. We’ve been looking for you."

Without warning, strong hands wrapped around her ankles, pulling her from under the table. Luella scrambled and kicked, clawed and hissed like a feline, but he was far too strong for her. Her shoulder ached with every movement.

"No, no!" Fear clouded her voice, turning it into a trembling, pitiful thing.

The male’s long, dark hair tumbled over his shoulder as he unsheathed a dagger, the silver of the blade glinting in the dark room. "He’ll be pleased we caught you. You haven’t been easy prey." He held the dagger between his teeth while his other hand pulled a length of harsh twine from his pants pocket. He snapped it before him and started to tie it around her ankles.

"Who are you speaking about? W-who sent you?" Luella demanded. The quiver in her limbs gave away her fear, even as she infused steel into her voice.

"You don’t know?" The male stopped, a hand circling her ankle as his deeply shadowed eyes squinted at her. "Damn, when he told me the fae were clueless, I thought it was an exaggeration. They haven’t told you anything?"

She shook her head, confused. "Told me *what*?"

"Let’s keep the suspense going, heirus," he taunted. "All in due time."

Luella resisted the urge to cross her arms and, instead, jammed her toe into the male’s side. Hard.

"You little fucker!" he hissed. His hands grew uncomfortably tight on her ankles, and he pressed the tip of the dagger into her thigh. The point of the blade drew a sharp and firm line up her pale skin, painting a strip of scarlet.

Blood bloomed and coated the material of her dress, and the sharp stinging made her whimper.

It wasn’t a deep cut. But it hurt nonetheless. Combined with her throbbing shoulder, she felt faint.

"I don’t think he’d care much if I brought you bruised and bloodied." The male’s shadowed eyes tracked where she was cradling her shoulder with one hand, and he pounced.

He lifted the dagger from her thigh and flipped it in his grasp to hold it by the blade. Blood tracked down his arm as he gripped it tightly, the sharpened, silver edges cutting into his palm.

Before Luella could jerk away, he rammed the pommel of the dagger right into the side of her shoulder.

White hot pain lanced down her arm like lightning.

Luella screamed, throat constricting and eyes welling up with tears.

"What do you… want from me?" she squeezed out.

Her head thumped against the ground, fingers weakly cradling her shoulder. Her whole side felt numb.

"That’s the thing, little heirus. I don’t want anything from you. But *he* does."

With a clang, the male dropped the dagger on the ground—his first mistake.

The rope cut into her ankles as he finished looping it around and tying it off, his focus solely on the length of twine as he moved to bind her wrists.

His second mistake.

In the darkness of the room, a flash of white crept along the corners.

Luella’s eyes tracked the blob, unable to make out what, exactly, she was looking at.

A slight sound—a snarl.

Teeth glinted in the shadows.

And it pounced.

In a blur of sharp teeth and sharper growls, a white wolf tore into the male, closing its jaw around his arm and dragging him away from Luella with a forceful tug.

He let loose a loud and wailful cry. Blood spurted from the wound as the wolf tore a chunk of flesh from his arm and spit it out as though it tasted rancid.

She scooted back against the wall, one arm under her as her other was held close to her chest. Her bound feet slipped across the quickly spreading puddle of blood, the warmth seeping into her feet and staining the brown twine of her bindings a deep maroon.

Two more wolves waited in the entrance to the alcove, nostrils flaring as they scented the fresh blood permeating the air. Their snouts nudged away the curtain keeping the room encased in darkness.

A hand joined the wolves, parting the curtains to the side and revealing a sight that should have made Luella tremble further. But she could only feel a sweet sense of relief flood through her bones.

Tharen had found her.

The Prima’s icy eyes swept over the room, taking in the wolf finishing off the male.

He no longer made noise. And his limbs…

Bile crawled up her throat.

They were scattered over the room. Little bits and pieces of mangled flesh and torn-apart appendages.

A sharp whistle cut through the room.

Tharen pulled his fingers from his lips, commanding the wolf to heel.

"Akira," he barked.

The wolf lifted its snout at the call of its master. Blood coated the fur around its mouth and left smudges of red on its black nose. Deadly fangs flashed as a pink tongue peeked out, sated.

Akira gave a soft rumble and trotted over to its master, sitting back on its haunches near Tharen and the other two wolves.

Tharen smirked as he noted the bindings on Luella’s ankles. "Need some help, little lamb?"

"Not from you," Luella growled, scooting back against the wall. But it must not have been as ferocious a noise as she wished.

Tharen scoffed, his heavy boots thudding on the ground as he walked closer and crouched near her.

He had left the curtains parted, and light filtered in. Shadows cut over the mage’s face. From what she could see, blood splattered in a macabre pattern over his tanned skin, and the inky black tattoos etched into his neck and chest stood out starkly against the red.

Even with all the blood on him, the mage didn’t appear hurt but exhilarated, more alive than she had ever seen him.

"Sure about that?" Tharen tapped her ankle, doing nothing to remove the twine keeping her trapped.

"Y-yes." Luella sniffed, her lower lip trembling.

Call her stubborn, but she would make do without any help from the likes of him.

As if he could read her thoughts, he said, "Stubborn little thing."

Tharen pressed his face closer to hers, and in the veil of shadows encasing the room, it was a rather intimate position. Luella was acutely aware of his sweaty, muscled chest brushing against hers; his large, lethal, and combat-honed body dwarfing her frame where she sat tucked against the wall. Her throat bobbed with a swallow.

"Know when to pick your battles, Princess." His nose brushed against hers, and her head thumped against the wall as she tried to move away from him. "This isn’t the time to be stubborn."

Tharen started to unwind the rope, his fingers deft and sure as he quickly unraveled them, muttering under his breath, "He did a shitty job at tying you."

Now free, she rolled her ankle and braced her hands against the wall to push herself up.

Well…

She attempted to, at least.

A cry of pain was torn from her lips. Luella fell back down against the wall, her arm giving out under her.

The wall scraped over her back as she shifted her body to relieve the pressure on her side. The pain was worse, a throbbing burn that radiated from her arm socket and stretched out all along her side.

The mage’s icy eyes grew wilder. "You’re hurt? Where?"

"My shoulder," Luella replied weakly.

In a move that was far more gentle than she would have expected from him, Tharen touched her forearm, skimming his fingers over her elbow and up to her arm socket. Just the tiniest brush of his fingers, and she squirmed away from the pain, letting out a soft cry.

Not deterred from her protests, Tharen poked and prodded at her swollen skin.

"Dislocated." His eyes flashed as he called on his magic and firmly pressed along her collarbone, touching a spot that made her wheeze. "And a hairline fracture on your sternum."

Luella bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. Anything to stop herself from crying out again. He didn’t deserve to know she hurt. Didn’t deserve to be witness to her weakness.

"I can’t heal you here. We’ll get you back to my apothecary."

"But…" Luella started. "What about the battle?" With his touches no longer prodding and his hands resting against her skin, she leaned into his touch, exhaustion weighing her down.

His features grew sharp with worry. "It’s almost over. They didn’t even stand a chance. Not against us."

"If that’s true, then why do you look so frightened?"

Tharen’s grip grew unrelenting on her shoulder, and Luella gritted her teeth against the deluge of pain. "I don’t get scared, little lamb." The mage all but hissed the words in her face, so close she could feel the hot puffs of his breath against her cheeks and lips.

She didn’t want to counter him.

But she knew what she saw.

Tharen *was* scared.

If their attackers weren’t a match for them, and he knew Serpentis would prevail, why did his countenance contradict his words? His tone was sure, yet his posture was on edge, shoulders tense and jaw clenched, the vein on his temple pulsed, and his tanned hands were white from how hard his free hand gripped his weapon.

Fear.

His snowy scent was coated in. Turning fresh white flakes into mottled clumps and melting puddles.

She breathed out through her nose, not willing to contest his claim.

"How will we get to your apothecary?" Luella changed the subject.

Tharen reached behind him and pulled free one of his longswords, the hilt encrusted with blood-splattered jewels. The blade was already coated in thick blood.

Strong hands went under her thighs, lifting her from the ground and tucking her against his chest. He was careful to keep her injured side away from him, a hand cradled protectively over her bad shoulder. It seemed he wasn’t even aware of the action, and Luella didn’t want to draw attention to it—it seemed the psychotic and strong-willed mage wasn’t as impervious as he claimed.

Instead of carrying her with both arms, he hoisted her legs around his waist, nudging her uninjured arm to grip his neck. Her thighs clenched as she held on, and the position left Tharen’s hands free to wield his sword. But on the downside, it put her far too close for comfort with him. Her hand brushed the hilt of the other sword at his back, and she skimmed her fingertips over his nape, his skin warming her.

Tharen’s braids brushed against her cheek from where her head was nestled into the crook of his neck, and beads of sweat dotted his tattooed neck, mingling with the bits of blood coating his skin.

Luella’s nose brushed against his pulse point, and she stifled a sigh.

A sharp whistle cut through the room as Tharen called his wolves to his side.

The trio of vicious beasts banded behind him, lips curling back from their teeth and hackles raised as Tharen lifted his sword, prepared to face the waning battle outside the alcove.

"Hold on," Tharen instructed.

A shiver wracked her frame as his chest rumbled under her. "Okay," she breathed.

The shadows clung to them as if urging them to stay in their midst. Or to keep them trapped.

Dying and weak battle cries sounded around her. Muffled pleas and frail calls.

It was almost over.

Luella curled closer to Tharen, thighs tightening around his waist.

It was almost over.

The words played like a mantra within her head, resounding in an echoed chorus with every slash of Tharen’s sword or sweep of his hand, his magic killing the dwindling attackers from a distance.

Not one drop of blood landed on her.

Nor did any assailants get close to her.

The throne room was littered with bodies, and the few attackers that were left were not in good shape. Her nose brushed against Tharen’s neck as she peeked behind her. Merely a few were left. She had escaped the worst of the battle tucked away—like a helpless babe—in the alcove.

All the attackers that were left standing were males, their bodies rugged and strong, expressions fierce. But they were still no match for Serpentis.

Bastian lazily reclined on a settee on the far side of the room, not a hair out of place or a finger lifted as he felled the attackers. His eyes flashed, the red nearly glowing. With his Mind magic, the vampire only had to look at someone to make them fall. Blood oozed out of his victims’ eyes, ears, and noses, and then, they dropped to the ground, comatose, as Bastian wiped every piece of awareness from their minds, turning them into an empty husk, unable to do anything but lay in a puddle of their own blood as death took them.

Tharen shifted to grip only one of her thighs, his fingers digging in deep as he threw out his other hand, a swath of orange fire burst from his fingertips, lighting a weary male’s entire body up in flames. His sword clattered to the ground, and he let out a pitiful wail as he burned, embers crackling. A charred crisp was all that was left of him.

The fetid scent of burning flesh assaulted her senses. Luella’s nose pressed into Tharen’s neck, seeking refuge from the effluvium.

Silent as night and shadow, black feathers fluttered to the ground around her right before Graves materialized beside them, knees bent and a sword gripped in his hands. His cowl was pulled up over the lower half of his face, hood over his head as his deep blue eyes scanned the room. The raven shifter pressed his back to Tharen’s, poised to strike.

"Took you long enough," Graves muttered.

"Just say you missed me," Tharen retorted.

Graves huffed under his breath and flung a dagger across the room. With a thunk, the blade buried into the chest of an oncoming attacker, blood spurting from the wound. "You wish."

"I’m surprised you parted with that dagger," Tharen said, a finger making a circle as he conjured up his Aer magic, lifting an assailant high to the shattered skylight before jerking his hand back down, their body cracking against the marble floors upon impact.

Blood seeped from the back of the male’s busted head, and Luella grew ill at the sickly sight.

Graves muttered a curse under his breath, head directed to where said dagger was buried deep in the dead male’s chest; the hint of the blade that was exposed above his chest cavity glistened with blood. "It was one of my favorites, but I don’t see how I had any choice in the matter." Suddenly, as if taking note of Luella wrapped around the mage, he poked her cheek. "Okay?" he mumbled.

She had to strain to hear him from how his cowl muffled his words.

"I—I guess." But it was a lie, and if the way his eyes narrowed into slits was any indication, he knew it.

From across the room, Bastian stood and sauntered over, sidestepping the maze of bodies littering the ground. His mouth opened wide as he yawned, and webs of red glowed from his half-lidded eyes.

"That was rather uneventful," the vampire remarked.

It was quiet in the room, the lingering cries of the dying were gone, and only the living courtiers and Serpentis soldiers remained.

They had won.

Strange how her enemy’s victory made her heart sing when it once was her downfall.

Luella felt safe enough to leave the mage’s hold. She tapped against Tharen’s shoulder to be let down, and his grip on her thighs and waist loosened. Her gown rode up over her thighs as her legs dropped from his waist; she hurried to right it, the broken links of the chain brushing against the floor as her hands moved, but Bastian beat her to it, smoothing down the rumples with pristine and clean hands.

Az lumbered over, shackled hands held in front of him. Splatters of blood coated his skin, and her eyes burned as she searched for any wounds, but she saw none. He appeared relatively unharmed. His chains dragged against the ground, and he held a piece of the length, tightening it around his fingers like a noose. Blood coated the sturdy steel, and little droplets fell from the chains, plinking against the puddles on the floor.

The demon leaned down and nuzzled his face against her cheek, his horns brushing against the crown of her head. "Angel," he rumbled.

She carefully lifted her good arm, pressing her fingertips against the side of his face in acknowledgment.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Luella opened her mouth, then promptly closed it. She couldn’t lie to him, so she gave a soft shake of her head. He growled, shackled hands tugging her against him. Her injured shoulder knocked into his side, and she choked out a pained gasp.

Az drew back, amber eyes frantic as he searched her, holding her body out from him as he scoured her, from the blood on her feet to her tangled hair. "What is it?"

"My shoulder." She cradled her arm to her chest, protective.

The muted happiness over their survival and the shock from the horrors had numbed the pain, but now, it was back in full force. A gnawing ache that lanced down her arm socket and radiated over her chest—from the fracture in her sternum, no doubt.

Tharen walked to the male Graves had killed with his dagger. He braced a hand on the male’s shoulder and tugged the blade free. It gave way with a soft, squelching noise, blood dribbling from the blade. Graves silently held up a gloved hand as Tharen tossed the dagger to him.

Even with the cowl covering his mouth, she imagined a tiny grin playing upon his scarred lips. She must have imagined it, but his eyes crinkled as he spun the dagger around in his grip, solemn.

"She’ll need a healer," Graves said. He didn’t even look her way.

Luella’s jaw ticked, and she stepped out of Az’s embrace, ignoring the twinge in her chest from how even the simplest act jostled her shoulder. "I am here, you know. Y-you don’t have to speak around me."

"Is the little lamb growing some teeth?" Tharen taunted.

Bastian gave a drawn-out sigh. "We don’t have time for this. In case anyone has forgotten"—he gestured around them—"King Vale has not returned yet."

The roars and wing beats of the dragons above had grown so distant that Luella had nearly forgotten—she guessed it could be forgiven with her own harrowing brush with death. But she wasn’t sure if the lack of noise was a sign of triumph or failure.

The throne room was silent, save for their talking, and the absence of noise made everything sharper. She was more aware now than ever of their stares, the cadence of their words, and the power that radiated from them all…

Tharen glanced up briefly. "He'll be back soon."

"How do you know?" Luella blurted.

Tharen looked at her, ice-filled eyes boring holes into her quivering frame. Az settled a hand on her side and pulled her back into him, careful of her shoulder this time.

Graves tucked his dagger back into his sleeve. "The King always wins." Confidence made the raven shifter's voice firm, and she was left with no choice but to believe him.

Luella lifted her eyes to the sky above.

Scant rays of golden dawn light peeked through the clouds, breaking up the darkness.

Morning was coming, and with it, freedom from the terrors that had infiltrated the night.

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UNLIKELY SAVING GRACE

"Watch out!" Az roared.

It happened too quickly for Luella to process.

Her head turned, golden hair whipping around her as she met deeply shadowed eyes.

One of the attackers—they had thought them all dead—had laid in wait, biding his time for a weak spot.

The opportunity to pounce.

And pounce, he did.

The male's long red hair blew back around him, revealing pointed ears. Swirls of tattoos dotted the skin of his hands. Hands that ferociously gripped the pommel of his bloodied sword.

His tanned skin was streaked with dirt and abrasions. Death called to him. And it made him fearless. Knowing he would soon meet his end, either way.

That fearlessness brought a sense of utter, reckless abandon, and the attacker wielded it to his advantage.

He snarled, a vicious, ghastly expression overtaking his weathered skin, lips curling up and tension cutting a harsh line between his thick brows.

The male was too close. Far too close. Too fast.

It was all too fast.

Az's hands curled over her shoulders, making her chest and wounded socket ache with pain. Tharen's hand outstretched, eyes growing vibrant

with magic as little sparks of vines flew from his fingertips.

But it was no use.

Luella gasped, hands jerking up to shield herself as much as she could.

And then, the unthinkable happened.

Silent as the shadows, Graves lunged.

The raven shifter jumped in front of Luella, shielding her body with his. A groan of pain emitted from Graves as the attacker’s sword pierced through his shoulder. It didn’t go all the way through, but the force of the blow made Graves stagger back into Luella. Az caught her against his chest, steadying her from his weight. In shock, Luella’s eyes grew wide, and she placed her hands on Graves’s warm back.

He saved her.

The throne room was utterly still, save for the sounds of her ragged breathing.

"Quickly," Graves barked, voice laced with strain from the pain of his wound.

Tharen nodded, vines shooting out and winding up the attacker’s legs, pinning him in place and completely immobilizing him.

The Prima lifted a hand, ready to end the red-haired male’s life, but Bastian stepped forward, a sharp cloud of reddened bloodlust falling over him as he lifted a hand for pause.

"Allow me," the vampire said as he stepped forward.

If it weren’t for the cries that fell from the red-haired male’s pale and chapped lips, a choked-up plea rumbling from the deepest parts of his chest, and the tears of blood that fell against his skin—matching tracks of scarlet dripping from his ears and down his neck, pooling from his nose and the corners of his mouth—Luella never would have guessed the vampire was to be blamed. But Mind magic had a particular way about it. Bastian wielded it perfectly, and no exertion was evident on his regal face, he was utterly relaxed as he brought the male to his end, stealing into his mind and ripping him apart.

It was no swift ending, though.

He drew it out, long and slow and painful, all with a look of glee.

Luella watched it all, trapped between Graves and Az, the raven shifter before her pinned with a sword in his shoulder, and the demon behind her, chained, unable to do anything to help.

The attacker gave a final cry, blood bubbling over his lips before he slumped, the vines tangled around him the only thing keeping him upright.

Tharen whistled, calling his wolf pack to him.

"Eat," the mage commanded with a jerk of his head. His braids swung over his shoulder, lip curled as he offered the dead male up as food for his wolf pack.

Just as the vines dissolved, the male falling in a heap to the blood-slick marble, the trio of beasts pounced, tearing limbs off in a flurry of low barks and growls.

Bastian wiped an imaginary piece of lint off his shoulder. "Well," he started. "There’s that problem taken care of." He paid no mind to the body parts on the floor as he walked closer, eyeing the sword stuck out of Graves’s shoulder. A pale finger swept over the blade, collecting the blood there. He lifted it to his nose and breathed deep. "Gods, I’m starved."

The vampire appeared to be at the edge of his patience, bloodlust threatening to consume him. Luella swallowed. Instead of tearing into Graves as she thought he would, Bastian jerkily wiped his palm on his pants, ridding himself of the blood. He pinched his nostrils and stepped back.

Luella moved a hand up to Graves’s neck, stealing herself with a breath as she pushed his hood back away from his face. No one was here save for them; she figured it to be safe, even though she didn’t know why he kept his identity a secret. She brushed her fingers over his nape, and he shuddered under her touch.

"Are you okay?" Luella breathed.

His gloved hands clenched as if searching for something before he skimmed a touch over her thighs. "I’ll live," he said quietly, then turned his attention to the Prima. "Tharen."

The mage narrowed his eyes on the sword before stepping in front of Graves. Luella was still tucked behind him, her whole body pressed tightly between Graves and Az.

"This will hurt," Tharen warned.

Graves nodded, the ends of his black hair tickling her fingers. She smoothed featherlight touches over his warm skin, silently offering assurance.

"Do it," Graves ordered, breathing deeply.

"Azgorath, step away with Luella," Tharen said.

The sound of her true name on the mage’s lips shocked her. He was more serious than she had ever seen before.

Az obeyed, pulling Luella a few steps away and gently keeping her arm tucked into her body. His chest rumbled under her as he whispered, "It’ll be over soon, Lu. Tharen will heal you, and you can rest."

She nodded, not sure if she believed it would be that easy. Not with King Vale still gone. They hadn’t truly won yet.

Tharen gripped the hilt of the sword, searching for something in Graves’s expression. She couldn’t see anything other than his back, but the Prima must have found whatever it was he was looking for because he gritted his teeth and then pulled.

The blade jerked out of Graves’s shoulder, and he keeled forward, a low groan tearing out of his chest. He staggered forward. Catching him with a hand on his shoulders, Tharen locked his arms around him.

"Fuck," Graves hissed out between his teeth. He pressed a hand to his shoulder, slick blood spreading out from between his fingers.

Luella could only imagine the pain. He was taking it far better than she would have. A twinge in her shoulder reminded her of her own pain, and she bit her lip to stifle a gasp.

Az’s hands fell from her as she stepped forward. He started to pull her back, but she peeked up at him and gave a wobbly smile. "It’s okay."

Her hands fluttered before her. Even hunched over in pain, Graves was a force to be reckoned with. Imposing and enigmatic, he loomed before her.

His pain was because of her. He had saved her from what could have been her demise.

"I—" she started.

Graves looked at her, the movement uncoordinated as he gave her his attention. The usual deepness that made his eyes so sharp and vivid was clouded over with the pain.

It was like a punch to the gut—being met with his stare. His cowl had come down to under his chin from the struggle, and the scar on his face was prominent from how pale his skin was. A stark line curving over his cheek and cutting into his lip. But he was still beautiful. All uncut edges and shadows.

"Why would you do that for me?" Her bare foot stepped into a puddle of blood as she stepped closer, but she was past the point of caring now.

Graves paused as if he didn’t even know the answer to that himself.

He rolled his shoulders back, posture straightening, even as he let loose a low groan, blood darkening his cloak.

"I didn’t want to see you hurt." Graves’s eyes tightened in a wince. "I can take the pain. You can’t."

She rolled her lip between her teeth.

The raven shifter was full of surprises.

Luella had expected him to say something different. Not admit to possibly caring for her, of all things.

Blood bloomed from the wound on his shoulder, but Graves did not seem concerned, even as he wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, releasing another pained groan.

"Damn it all to the Below," he spat. "That hurts."

"Let me see." Luella stepped forward and raised on her tiptoes, fingers hovering over the bloody rip in his shirt.

She gently peeled away his fingers, careful not to be too rough. Graves watched her silently as she looked at the wound.

It was hard to tell with all the blood and his shirt obscuring it, but it was bad. Deep but not too wide from the narrow point of the sword. Small blessings. She didn’t have much—or any—experience with wounds, but from what Luella could tell, Graves needed a healer. And soon.

If he didn’t get this patched up, he could die.

Shouldn’t she want that?

Realization slammed against Luella like a crashing wave.

She was worried for him.

Worried.

For the male who had played a role in destroying her kingdom and capturing her.

The anxiety welling within her was *for* him. Not because of him.

Graves was important to King Vale, and the King was gone—his court circled her, but with Az by her side and Graves weakened, maybe she stood a chance.

Luella shifted her attention to the demon, and his eyes widened at what he saw on her face. Az gave an imperceptible shake of his head, warning her.

It could be quick. Luella could lift the dagger from the sheath on Graves’s waist and finish him off; it wouldn’t even take much. He was

unsteady on his feet, and his temples were beaded with a cold sweat. The real problem would be Tharen.

Bastian—

The vampire said he wouldn’t hurt her, but did he mean it? Could Luella count on him to at least look the other way, if not aid her?

Her mouth parted in thought. Dare she be cunning and brave?

Something about taking this opportunity to prey on his weakness made her stomach churn with nausea. It would make her just as evil as them.

Graves leaned into her, and she took on more of his weight, fingers curling in his black hair.

Her eyes burned with tears. She couldn’t.

Luella cleared her throat. "You need a healer."

Graves lifted his head, but she couldn’t even meet his eyes, instead keeping her gaze trained on that amulet attached to his neck. The stone was misted with blood.

"I’ll survive until we get you to safety." Graves pushed off of her, standing unsteadily on his own.

From a few paces away, Bastain interjected, "But we need to hurry. You’re losing blood."

"And we still don’t know where Vale is," Tharen commented.

A dragon roar from above grew closer, shaking the ground under her. Quick as lightning, Bastian was beside her, standing between her and Graves, bracing them both while being careful of their wounds.

"That answers that question," the vampire remarked dryly.

Luella peered up, eardrums threatening to rupture from the twin sounds of dragon roars. It was deafening and growing closer with every passing moment. Mouth parting as he looked up, Az pulled her into his chest, shielding her ears as much as he could.

"Is he winning?" the demon yelled.

Tharen smirked, casting a look over his shoulder. "Without a doubt."

Pausing, Bastian lifted three fingers, a smile curving up on his sensual lips. Luella’s brow furrowed. He lowered a finger, grin growing wider. Then another.

With one finger raised, the vampire suddenly gasped a curse.

"Take cover!" Bastian yelled.

That was all the warning they received before the wall behind the throne caved inwards.

Luella was thrown to the ground by the force of the blow.

Sprinkles of pulverized stone and chunks of the wall rained down around them all, turning the once beautiful room into a ruinous scape.

Her ears rang. Numbness was a thick and heavy blanket pressing down on her body.

She lifted her head, eyes half-lidded and mind clouded with fog as she looked around the room in the aftermath.

"No," Luella whispered.

Where was Az?

"A-Azgorath." Her voice was but a breathy, soundless plea.

Her gaze raked over the room, past the stone chunks and fallen glass, over the lifeless bodies and puddles of blood.

Then, she saw them, thrown about on the ground in various states of disarray.

She gave a soft, wearisome exhale as Tharen sprang up, red rivulets running down from his ears. The mage didn’t hesitate before drawing his two swords, one in either hand as he prepared his stance to fight, knees spread and posture locked as he scanned the room, never settling on one spot for long as he waited for a threat to emerge.

She slowly placed her hands under her and pushed herself off the ground, shaking her head to dispel the thick haze. Discombobulation threatened to topple her right over, but she fought against it, refusing to give in. Her shoulder ached something fierce. Every breath made her breastbone seize with pain.

Luella stumbled to a stand, lip trembling as she searched for her demon.

"Az," she called. "Azgorath."

It was quiet.

The dust settled around her and coated her skin in ash from the rubble—no more enchanted gold.

An arm laid upon a thick block of stone.

She pressed a hand to her lips to quell her sound of fear.

Eyes closed and face relaxed, Az was lying on his side. She fell to her knees, dragging herself over to him. Her arm screamed in protest.

"Az," Luella murmured, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up." She leaned down over him, her golden hair falling over her shoulder and brushing his

chest as she turned him on his back. Unresponsive. Her lip wobbled.

He couldn’t be dead. *No*. Please, not him.

The only one who had shown her care and affection in her entire life, taken from her before they could explore the *something more* that was between them. She shook him with renewed vigor, barely registering the way her body ached and pain flared from her hurried movements.

"*Azgorath*," Luella pleaded.

A shadow fell over the floor.

She looked up. Tharen stood above her, looking at the way she was curled over the demon with something that almost appeared to be jealousy.

"Help him," Luella implored, hands grabbing at the bottom of the mage’s pants. She would do anything. "Please."

Tharen let out a sigh and knelt on the ground, brushing her hands away from him. He placed a palm on Az’s forehead and closed his eyes in concentration. Warmth radiated from Tharen as he probed the demon’s injuries with his magic, and Luella leaned into it—into him—subconsciously.

The moments ticked by. Every passing breath of time made her more and more anxious.

Just when she was going to speak, lips parting with a quivering question on her tongue, Tharen opened his eyes.

He turned to look at her, brushing his pointer finger over the side of her cheek in thought. "He’s fine. The enchantments on the chains are stalling his healing, but he’ll live."

"Take them off, then," she demanded.

Surely, he wouldn’t leave the chains on just to spite the demon, not if his safety was a concern. But she underestimated his cruelty. Or overestimated her kindness…

"No." A final statement, brooking no argument.

Graves appeared like smoke, standing silently, a hand braced on his shoulder and lips downturned in pain, but he was vigilant, his free hand holding a dagger like a vice as he stood guard over them, letting them care for Az while he kept a watchful eye.

That was the second time Luella felt something akin to gratitude for the raven shifter.

Bastian was behind him, a slight waver to his gate as he walked. The vampire looked the worst out of all of them—he had been closest to the

blast. Her own ears rang still. She couldn’t imagine how a being with even more heightened senses would feel, and one that was as close as he had been to the wall that had exploded inward.

Luella looked away from the others, hands clenching at her skirts as she bowed her head over Az.

"Please." Warmth dribbled over her neck, and she absentmindedly swiped at it. Blood. Wiping her palms on her ruined gown, she leaned over Az. "Wake up," she whispered over his cheeks. "Come back to me." Az’s brow furrowed, but his eyes remained closed.

He was listening to her.

"He’ll be okay, pet." Bastian knelt beside her, tucking her into him. "Stand up." He pulled her up, and she leaned her entire weight on him, too tired to care how close he was or how vulnerable the act made her.

A low and pained sound fell from Az’s lips. Hope welled in her chest. He was waking up!

Tharen fit his hands under Az’s arms, lifting him into a sitting position.

The roaring call of the dragons grew louder and louder, threatening to shatter her already damaged ear drums. She winced, pressing her face into Bastian’s chest.

They didn’t have any energy left to fight. She wasn’t sure if they would survive another attack. Luella could only hope somehow, King Vale would win.

She watched Az, taking in the rise and fall of his beautiful, tanned chest. Even the blood on him could do nothing to take away from his savage allure. Movement from behind his closed lids, his thick lashes fluttering over tanned skin.

And Az opened his eyes.

Warm amber focused right on her. Bleary but alive. Luella sighed in relief, a smile wanting to rise, but she didn’t allow it. They hadn’t won yet.

The demon batted Tharen’s hands away as he tried to help him stand.

"I don’t need your help," Az slurred. He stood on his own, staggering, before righting himself. He met her gaze. "Angel?"

Always making her his priority. Luella melted.

"I’m fine. But you… Az." She shook her head, beyond words of the fear that had come over her.

She had been threatened with the prospect of losing him, and that was all it took for her to realize how much she had grown to care for him.

Feelings she had never experienced before weighed heavy on her mind and soul, but Luella tucked them away.

Later.

She would revisit these new feelings *later*.

Another roar shook the room, and the wind whipped through the open hole where the wall once stood. Little pieces of jagged rock and stone crumbled to the floor in disarray around the gaping hole, revealing the cliffs outside and, beyond that, the expanse of the ocean.

The courtiers who lived had fled once victory seemed assured. Dead bodies on the floor were crushed under the stones, torn-off limbs strewn about the room in puddles of gore. They were alone here.

Az stumbled to a stop beside her. As Luella looked out at the open hole, waves crashing in the distance, little rays of dawn sun cutting through the clouds, the others stood around her. The group looked out over the ruins of the once-opulent room.

In the early light of morning, large wings beat through the fluffy clouds, making loud thumps as they flew closer and closer. Luella started to make out the shape, chest tight with anxiety as she waited to see if the approaching dragon was the King or not.

Luella tried not to focus on how, with such vivid desperation, she wished it *was* him—that he had lived. Even when she knew it was a foolish wish. If he died, that would have been one problem solved. But the evil you know was better than the evil you don’t, and Luella didn’t want to try her luck with their attackers.

The rising sun illuminated the approaching dragon, casting an eery visage as it revealed the dragon’s glittering onyx scales.

"King Vale," Luella breathed. She squinted as he flew closer.

"What the fuck?" Tharen mumbled.

Something was in the dragon’s mouth.

Was that—

"What does he have?" Bastian asked.

No one responded.

The dragon flew closer, onyx cutting through the puffy clouds and golden sky. Just as the dragon flew free of the clouds, Lualla froze where she stood, her uninjured hand fluttering to her chest.

Gripped in the dragon’s mouth was a decapitated dragon head. White and golden scales clutched in his snout. Smoke billowed from his nostrils as

he huffed, wings beating as he flew closer. The onyx dragon hovered in the air outside the exposed wall, wings beating so powerfully it kicked up the wind around them and made her hair whip around her. The bottom of her dress blew out, and Luella staggered back into Az from the force of it.

"Oh." She was arrested at the sight of him. King Vale was… magnificent.

Dangerous and deadly.

Fearsome.

Her mouth dropped open in awe and fear.

This was the legendary King. The cruel and indomitable ruler of Serpentis.

His green eyes glowed as he lowered, taloned feet clawing against the stone cliffs outside the castle, seeking purchase. He rumbled around the head of the enemy dragon, sharp teeth flashing and a leg scratching against the stone before he opened his mouth.

The head dropped from his maw and bounced off stone cliffs and sharp, jagged edges of rock before tumbling down, down, down into the crashing sea below. Swirling, white sea foam and deep blue waves swallowed it whole. The glinting scales of white and gold disappeared under the ocean’s depths, never to be seen again.

In his dragon form, King Vale stood like a valiant conqueror before them all. Perched upon stony cliffs in his domain, the ruins of his throne before him. Blood and bodies strewn about the marble floors, enemies fallen by the hands of the King’s ruthless courtiers and soldiers. His might was irrefutable.

Dark grey smoke blew from his nostrils as he huffed. Warmth. Promises of the fire welling deep within. The dragon stepped closer, talons scraping on the stone. His large head butted against the deconstructed walls of rubble.

He seemed to be waiting for something, unable to leave or shift until he got whatever it was he was searching so desperately for.

"I’ve never seen him like this," Bastian breathed. The vampire braced a hand on Tharen’s shoulder, keeping himself upright.

Tharen gripped Bastian’s side. The show of comradery and support was unusual for the mage. It seemed even he could find it in himself to care about a living creature.

They all waited with bated breath, watching the dragon and trying to figure out what his next move would be… what it was that he wanted.

An onyx-scaled head swung over the group, sharp eyes cataloging their bloodied clothes and battered figures.

And when those piercing green, larger-than-life eyes fell on Luella, all thought was stolen from her.

Graves silently stood by her other side, placing a gloved hand on her injured shoulder, his touch so light she barely took note of it. He was leaning heavily from his injuries, mouth pinched.

"He wants you." Graves sounded as astonished as she felt.

"What?" Luella asked, her voice a quiet and meek thing, careful to call too much attention to where she stood in the circle of protection of the four males.

"Dragons are deeply territorial. More so than other shifters. To them, eye contact is like branding. A mark of ownership or a claim." Tharen stepped closer to Luella, attention volleying back and forth between the dragon and Luella as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

Az grumbled behind her. "He can’t claim her. I won’t allow it."

The demon bared his teeth in warning, and a fresh plume of smoke wafted from the dragon’s nostrils, wings stretching wide beside him as he rose to Az’s challenge.

"No, *no*," Luella hurried to interject. "No more fights." Placing a palm on Az’s bare skin, her fingers itched to grip him tighter, dragging him into her. She bit her lip and looked up at him. "For me, please. I can’t lose you."

Her brow thumped against his chest. Luella couldn’t look him in the eyes. It was all on the line, just there, brimming under the surface. It wouldn’t take much before he would realize. Before they would all realize —just how much he meant to her.

Az stroked a hand down her back, ignoring the dragon’s rumbles. "For you," he replied. "Anything. But I can’t—I *won’t* let him have you, Lu."

"And I won’t let you fight him, Az."

They were locked in a battle of wills. The demon with a blood oath to protect her and an urge to be the only one to claim her. And the heirus Princess with a bleeding heart, unwilling to risk losing the one she had come to cherish so.

"As much as this thaws my cold heart, you seem to forget a territorial dragon is breathing down our necks." Tharen’s words were lighthearted, but

his posture was anything but. The mage seemed wary of King Vale in his dragon form.

Talons scraped against the stone incessantly. Puffs of breath warmed the exposed skin of her back. Luella turned to face the dragon once more, head craning up to meet his green eyes. His narrowed pupils glinted like the onyx scales covering his body. She swallowed in fear, palms sweaty. Shoulder and chest aching.

He wouldn’t look away from her.

"Go to him," Bastian urged quietly. "He won’t hurt you. I swear it."

"No," she nearly hissed. She wouldn’t listen to his promises; they meant nothing to her. Not even from Bastian. Not in the face of this deadly beast.

How could Bastian promise the King wouldn’t harm her? He couldn’t know that, could he?

Graves cleared his throat beside her, fingers tightening on her shoulder. Even through the material of his glove, his skin felt leeched of all warmth. Like ice.

They were wasting time. They all needed a healer. Especially Graves and Az.

"Do it. Now," Graves ordered.

The dragon’s eyes narrowed into slits. It reminded her so much of how the King had looked at her with such scrutiny the first time she had seen him—when she was thrown onto the steps of the palace before him, awaiting her fate.

But this time, those eyes held no malice toward her. Only to the ones around her. In his shifted form, the beast would have taken over, robbing the King of all rational thought. To him, anything standing in the way of what he wanted was a threat, ready to be taken down with a puff of fire-filled breath or a swipe of sharp claw.

Luella couldn’t let this escalate. She wasn’t sure how he felt about Az, but she knew the King would never forgive himself if he harmed the others. Even if he never admitted it.

She steeled herself with a sharp breath, her chest feeling like it may crack as it rose. "Okay. But not for you. And not for me. To keep Az safe," Luella said, with a voice quiet as a whisper and soft as smoke.

Eyes of amber and the scent of rich cocoa were at the forefront of her mind when she made her decision.

She left the cocoon of safety the males around her offered. Az's hand fell from her, and Graves urged her forward with a soft nudge on her lower back.

Bare feet padding against cool marble, she carefully stepped over the fallen bits of stone, hands scrambling as she climbed over the fallen rock and large rubble. This close to the edge, she could see where the open hole dropped down far into the sea below, only a short face of cliffs disappearing down into the watery depths. She knew the sea would be icy cold. The climate in Serpentis was frigid, and the air whipped around her. The only warmth came from the short puffs of smoke leaking from the dragon's snout. He was unmoving where he perched upon the rocks, and Luella couldn't help but feel like a lamb being led off to slaughter.

She crawled over a stone, knees scraping along the rough surface before she stopped. Her legs were wobbly under her as she stood to her full height. The stone offered her a higher vantage point, bringing the top of her head to the chest area of the dragon. All she would have to do was reach out her arm, and she could touch those glittering scales.

What would he feel like? Would they be as hard and unforgiving as his persona? Or as soft and silky as they looked. Sleek onyx scales so closely fit on top of each other that they looked like ripples of fabric.

Her chest rose and fell with short little pants of her feared breathing. Luella met King Vale's green eyes. Wings so large, they blocked the tiny rays of dawn, trying to dispel the shadows of night. The dragon was warm and grand, and even when she should be scared, she wanted nothing more than to let herself be wrapped up in those wings, kept safe and protected.

Ever so slowly, the dragon lowered his head, eyes finally breaking from hers. Submission. This dragon… The King.

He was submitting to her.

His snout prodded the air before him, huffs of smoke blowing golden tendrils of her hair away from her cheeks. The warmth called a flush to her skin as he drew closer. Waiting. He was still waiting for something. She resisted the urge to look behind her, afraid to break the trance that had befallen him lest it make him turn that dragon's prideful cruelty on her.

The others were silent behind her.

She was on her own.

When the dragon did not move his head from his lowered position, she hesitantly lifted her uninjured hand. Her fingers shook as she reached out to

him, a constant quake speaking of her pure, unadulterated fear. One wrong move, and she would be burnt to a crisp.

Heat radiated from the scales like embers sparking over coal.

A low grumble sounded from deep within his chest. It didn’t sound threatening. If anything, it was peaceful. A pliant state overtook her, turning her limbs to mush. Stretching forward, she closed the last bit of space between them, and her hand rested upon the dragon’s snout.

He was soft and pleasantly warm to the touch, so different from the thick heat that radiated from him. Her fingertips were merely ghosting over his scales, but she yearned to touch more, stroke her hands over the large wings. Feel the power that rippled below the surface.

Lips parting, she waited for him to pounce. What if it was the wrong move?

The rumble grew lower, longer, a drawn-out purr welling from the deepest parts of the dragon’s soul, radiating out and soothing her worries away.

The dragon’s snout pushed firmer into Luella’s palm. A smile tugged at her lips.

"Hello," she whispered under her breath.

A grumble was the only answer she received.

But it was enough.

"Somehow, you’re not as frightening this way." Luella let out a low laugh, the dragon making an answering chuff, tendrils of smoke blowing in her face.

The beast preened under her touch, scales warm against her palm. The dragon could open its mouth and swallow her in an instant, but Luella was not afraid.

She knew shifters were overcome by their basal instincts in their shifted forms, and the King was no exception. Right now, he wasn’t King Vale but a fire-breathing dragon who knew only two things: to possess and to kill.

And right now, he wanted the first—to possess her.

Why didn’t that scare her as much as it should?

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DRUGGED

King Vale had disappeared.

After Luella had stood face-to-face with the dragon in the ruins of the throne room, he flew away.

Graves hold told her that the King was fine—that he would shift and come back after getting a grip on his beast. *It was always jarring to shift*, Graves had shared in that silent way of his.

Luella wasn't sure if she believed it. She couldn't help but feel like somehow she was the reason he had fled.

He was scared, her mind whispered to her.

Scared of the claim had staked on her.

And she felt the same.

Even now, curled into the plush seat of Tharen's apothecary, Luella worried her lower lip with her teeth. Her arm and chest ached fiercely, but she had forced the mage to see to Graves first.

Listing to the side, the raven shifter could barely walk to the apothecary. He had to be dragged by Tharen and Bastian.

Luella's feet kicked out as she waited. The lighting was low and warm. Flickering flames made her drowsy. A yawn threatened to crack her jaw. Luella sank against the high back of the chair, nestling her cheek against the soft leather.

She could fall asleep.

A hand against her cheek startled her, and she forced her eyes open. Blearily, she took in the male before her.

Red eyes bore into her, and Bastian tutted under his breath. "Don’t fall asleep, pet. You’re up next."

"Tired," Luella grumbled under her breath, foot kicking out against the chair and hitting the vampire’s shin.

Bastian huffed a laugh, smoothing the blood-matted hair away from her face. "I know, I know. Just stay awake for me a little longer, and then you can sleep. How does that sound?"

She mumbled an unintelligible noise in reply, eyes falling closed again as she snuggled into the chair.

Az was sitting beside her, his warmth soothing her. The scent of burnt sugar and rich chocolate made her head and limbs even heavier. Her hip pressed flush into his, and she suppressed a satisfied sound at his proximity. The demon was rather alert after being knocked unconscious earlier. He swore he was fine, but she wouldn’t rest until Tharen looked him over.

"How’s your arm, Lu?" A nudge against her cheek as Az’s horns bumped against her.

She ached so deeply that she felt like she could pass out.

"Fine," she murmured, cracking both eyes open as she peeked over at him.

Az cocked a brow as though he could see right through her little lies.

He leaned over, brushing his nose softly against hers. Dried blood still dirtied his tanned skin, and she yearned to wipe it away for him. She felt some part of him touch her soul—that magicless, yawning pit seemed to lean toward him, searching for his heat.

At her front, Bastian stood a mere breath away, his scent of spiced bergamot seeping into the very marrow of her bones.

Why couldn’t she just fall asleep?

Her eyes struggled to stay open with every blink.

"Luella," Tharen called. His harsh tone pulled her from her dazed stupor—from the unwavering attention of Az and Bastian.

She perked up, and Bastian nudged her forward on the chair with a hand on her uninjured shoulder. Az grumbled a low sound from deep within his chest, pulling her against him and helping her up on his own.

Males.

Luella felt a small smile rise to her lips, but the pain from her movements dampened the momentary rush of happiness.

A wince tugged her fleeting smile down into a frown.

She *really* did feel like she would faint…

She stumbled to a stand. "What about Az?"

Four heavy looks of disbelief settled on her. Her shoulders curved inward under their scrutiny.

"If you do not get in that chair and let the Prima heal you, I'll bite you." Bastian flashed his fangs in warning.

Her cheeks warmed at his domineering tone.

Luella had never been the sole object of such attention before. And to suddenly have four males never taking their attention off of her made her already fuzzy head even more out of sorts.

Tharen stood by the half-reclined leather chair. A flickering flame was burning beside it, offering light for him to see. Tools rested on a small table. Tiny knives, surgical instruments, and a needle and thread for sutures. A silver tray held a discarded, bloody cloth and tiny pieces of wire that Tharen had used to sew Graves's wound. She shuddered at the slight tang of iron and the grisly sight of the blood dirtying the tray. Luella never did enjoy the sight of blood. Especially blood from someone she knew.

The raven shifter was looking much better now that he had been tended to. He was shirtless, his tanned, unmarked skin lined with lean muscle. A patch of bandages was over his shoulder, and he rolled his arm back, wincing at the tug on his wound.

"Stop it, you brooding fucker," Tharen ordered. "You'll pull your stitches. Can't you sit still?"

He leveled the mage with a look that even made Luella stop in her tracks.

"Hard to rest when Vale is still out there." Graves ran a hand through his black hair and down over the stubble on his jaw.

Her throat worked as she watched the muscles in his stomach ripple from the movement. He was hiding such power under his thick cloaks and terse silences.

"This isn't the first time Vale has disappeared to do gods knew what. At least now we know *why* he left in such a fuss." Tharen stared Luella down where she stood on shaky legs, and he grabbed her waist and lifted her with ease, sitting her down in the chair.

The leather stuck to her blood-soaked dress. The slit on the side of her gown exposed almost her whole thigh, and she felt cool sweat against her heated skin—and it was not her own.

Graves’s bare chest had warmed this same chair, biting into a leather strip while Tharen cleaned his wound, then threaded his skin with sutures. He had silently taken it all, teeth grinding into the bit. She peeked at the raven shifter, who was now sitting in the chair she had just vacated. Perspiration dotted his chest and temples, making his dark hair stick to his forehead.

His sweat stuck to her skin.

Breath escaped her lungs as she settled against the leather.

A finger notched against her chin forced her face down.

"Lay back, little lamb," Tharen urged, pressing her back with a hand against her lower stomach.

Her gut clenched from his touch, a shiver passing through her. He gave her a knowing grin. It reminded her of a wolf who had stumbled upon easy prey.

Luella’s bones were like mush as she sank back fully into the leather chair, and the position made the mage tower over her, putting them in a spot that was a physical manifestation of the power he wielded over her—the mage far above her, and Luella somewhere down below, her power nonexistent and status inconsequential.

"I’ll have to fix the fracture first before popping your shoulder back into place. If I don’t, it could aggravate the fracture even more and cause it to splinter out." The mage leveled her a look of warning. "But make no mistake, it’ll hurt either way I do this. Even with a tonic."

She nodded. "I-I understand."

Tharen gave her his back, turning to a little worktable filled with potions—the same litany of bubbling vials and liquids that he had used to craft a potion to heal the sickness that had taken her in the dungeons.

It made a memory spark to life—how he had given her a tonic, and she had awoken in her room.

"You better not drug me again." Her bottom lip jutted out in a pout.

A white braid fell over Tharen’s shoulder as the mage whipped his head back around. He didn’t say anything. The pure look of ire he shot her was more than enough.

Liquid fizzed and popped as he poured a thick, bubbly stream of red liquid into the small cauldron. He gave it a quick stir with a wooden stick and, as if in afterthought, poured a bit more inside until it seemed satisfactory. With a pair of forceps, he lifted an empty vial and dipped it inside. Shoots of smoke popped up, but he ignored it, turning his head away.

Az sidled up beside Luella, half-sitting on the armrest of her chair. "It'll be over soon, Lu."

"That means you'll go back to the dungeons." Luella was careful to keep her voice down.

She didn't want him to leave her. Not again.

Az stroked the ends of her hair, gathering it up and brushing it back from her shoulders. "Only for a little while. I promise." He leaned down and whispered into her ear, "They can't keep me away from you forever. Now that I have you, I'll never let you go."

Their whispering was futile. All the ears in this room could hear everything.

Tharen turned, and Az pulled away from her like he didn't just make her melt with mere words alone.

Mouth dry, she swallowed, feeling overcome by the intensity of four sets of eyes on her.

The aches in her body were familiar to her now, but that didn't stop her from wincing as she shifted in her seat, her arm jostling.

"Careful," Bastian warned.

He leaned against the wall, reddened eyes intently watching her and arms crossed over his broad chest. A finger tapped agitatedly on his forearm, and the veins in his neck pulsed. He was keyed up.

Tharen pressed the now-full vial into Luella's hands, then turned and lifted the bloodied cloth on the tray. Bastian tracked the movement like a starved animal, and the mage tucked the cloth in his pocket, not paying the vampire's blood-hungry eyes any heed. Like he was used to his bloodlust.

She held the vial in her hands. The liquid was a light cherry color and smelled just like the fruit itself but with an underlying hint of mint.

She brought it to her lips, tilting it back to let the cool liquid slide down her throat. Tart cherries and refreshing, wintery mint exploded on her tongue. She hummed as she drank, the tonic cooling her parched throat and helping to rid her of her thirst.

"Every last drop," Tharen murmured.

When the glass was finished, he took it from her hands and set it aside. They all watched her, waiting for the potion to kick in.

A few moments of heavy silence passed, and Luella’s head slowly grew heavy. She blinked furiously, trying to regain her wits, but every part of her was sluggish.

"What did that do?" she slurred.

Body too heavy for her to keep holding upright, her head listed to the side, thunking on Az’s thigh.

Hands lifted her upright, much too cool to belong to her demon.

"It made you just a little bit more drowsy, pet," Bastian muttered in her ear, settling her back against the seat.

A warm touch brushed her other side as Az smoothed away the lines of worry creased between her brows.

She nuzzled into the touches, starved for affection.

"I think I like her better like this," Tharen said from somewhere out of sight.

Luella jolted as the mage suddenly appeared right in front of her. Through half-lidded eyes, she watched as Tharen nodded and made a waving gesture with his hand. Bastian gripped her, pulling her tightly to him as he sat flush against her. His fingers were like a vice against her waist.

"You were already tired though, hm? But now everything will be numbed just enough to not make you pass out from the pain. Not completely numb, though." Tharen tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, rubbing the strands between his fingers like he was seeing it for the first time. "Azgorath, move aside. I can’t have you near her. This will hurt her, and you can’t take your protective rage out on me when I’m trying to heal her."

"Even in these chains, you’re afraid of me, Prima. You only make yourself appear weak," Az grumbled, but as his warmth left her side, she realized he obeyed.

Tharen ignored Az’s taunting barbs. "Graves, a little help?"

Instead of answering, the raven shifter silently stood and glided over, not even a wince on his face after being almost impaled with a sword and then stitched back together. The harsh candlelight overhead made the scar

on his face even more severe, casting ghoulish shadows in the hollows of his cheeks and under his deep blue eyes.

Luella slowly blinked, looking up at him. He took the spot on her other side—where Az had been—not quite touching her.

"That won’t do," Tharen said. "Sit behind her and spread your legs. Place her between your thighs."

With the serum making her drowsy and drunk, Tharen’s words sounded far more provocative than they should have.

Bastian made her lean up, and Graves slotted behind her, bent knees on either side of her as he pulled her in between the space of his legs. He was warm all over and so large. Luella fit perfectly in the cradle of his legs. Her head rolled back on his chest, only to find him already looking down at her. Silently—as usual.

Tharen lifted a gleaming knife and held it before him; the blade was small and thin. Before she could move away, his arm snaked forward, and the blade cut away the strap of her dress. It slipped down her chest, almost baring her breasts completely, if not for Graves’s quick hand tugging it back up.

"Thank you," she mumbled, cheek pressing against his chest.

In her current state, she couldn’t find it in her to be offended that he didn’t reply.

"Don’t move," Tharen said. Luella barely had time to register his words. "Hold her still."

Graves gripped her, holding her upper body still with a firm palm against her neck, and a strong arm looped around her chest, keeping her pulled against him. Bastian’s fingers tightened, and she glanced over to him, eyes flicking to where he sat beside her, then moving to where Tharen prepared a few clean pieces of cloth and readied his supplies.

Her breaths grew frantic when he picked up a blade. It was barely the size of her thumb, but somehow, it looked far more menacing directly under the light of the flames.

Graves gripped her chin, directing her face back toward his. "Keep your eyes on me," he said.

Counting the specks of darker blue in his irises, Luella’s breathing slowed, returning to soft puffs of exhales followed by steady inhales.

"Good," Graves praised.

Luella’s tongue grew thick in her mouth, and she licked her lips, tasting the cherry from the tonic still lingering there.

With a firm grip on her elbow, Tharen lifted her injured arm. Luella yelped as pain radiated from her aching socket, trying to move away from his offending touch as he straightened her arm out completely. But with Bastian’s hold on her and Graves keeping her held captive by his eyes and locked between his thighs, she couldn’t move a muscle. Trapped and at their mercy.

Tharen prodded her elbow, making firm presses all the way up to her white-hot, throbbing shoulder.

"*Ah*!" Luella let out a pained moan, eyes fluttering closed.

"Look at me," Graves ordered and tugged against her jaw.

She squinted up at the raven shifter, unable to ignore his demand.

He shushed her, grip unrelenting on her chin, leaving her no choice but to keep her head cast toward his.

She released a shaky breath.

"Graves." Luella didn’t know why she uttered his name, but it felt good as she said it. She rolled the letters around her tongue, tasting the cadence of him. "Graves. Thank you for saving me."

His eyes widened at the sound of his name falling from her slick, cherry-coated lips. His tongue darted out to lick his own, captivated by her softness.

Graves’s jaw locked as if to say, *don’t thank me*. But his eyes held a different story, screaming that perhaps he hadn’t been thanked enough in his lifetime.

Had he ever even heard the words directed toward him before?

The male had saved her. Jumped in front of a sword meant for her and did it all without asking for anything in return. Perhaps he wasn’t as bad as she thought. She would never forget what he had a part in doing to her… But could she forgive?

Her hazed eyes focused on Az, the demon sitting up with his elbows on his knees as he watched Tharen like a hawk, just waiting for one wrong move before he had cause to attack the male on her behalf.

The collar around his neck was stark against his tanned skin, and his deep brown curls brushed the back of it as he moved his head, the metal moving as he swallowed.

No.

She couldn’t forgive. Because of Az. The people of Solis.

For herself and her parents—wicked and unfeeling as they were—she might have been able to, but not the innocents.

Luella was raised like she was mere scum, and her self-worth was dismal at best. Any forgiveness she might have felt for her parents was held back by the memory of her father’s strikes against her cheeks and her mother’s lack of care and concern. A tiny piece of her rejoiced in their death. She was free of *them*, but not free. Not truly. She wondered if she ever would be.

"Hold her arm for me," Tharen ordered.

Bastian took her outstretched arm, fingers delicately gripping it and keeping it straight as Tharen lifted a bowl filled with a thick paste that was an off-white and mottled yellow color, stirring it with something that looked like a golden-tipped paintbrush.

Graves still held the strap of her dress, but Tharen knocked his hand away, making the neckline scoop in a sinfully low dip. She tried to muster up some semblance of propriety but couldn’t find it in her to care. Not with the buzz in her head and the muted pain in her limbs.

The mage placed his free hand directly over her breastbone; his palm radiated heat, almost too hot to be comfortable. She squirmed away from it. He was silent, and his touch was insistent and unforgiving. Not harsh, but firm. He didn’t waver, merely kept his palm on the spot where she assumed the fracture was located.

Addled and bleary, she watched as Tharen’s eyes closed, and he mumbled something under his breath. His touch grew impossibly hotter, and just when she felt like her skin might melt off from the heat of his touch alone, it all stopped. In an instant, his hand retracted. Her chest felt tingly and warm but was quickly cooling now that he wasn’t touching her anymore.

Luella blinked, focus never leaving Graves. His warm, calloused fingers rubbed over the side of her waist, tapping against her ribs. The corner of his scarred lip twitched upward from her obeying his command to keep her eyes on him. He was pleased with her.

She tried not to preen under his careful watching and firm touches, but with the heady scent of cloves and sweet honey wafting from him and dancing around the air between them, she was powerless against his soft charisma and intrigue. Coupled with the image that assaulted her every time

she shut her eyes—the sword piercing his chest, the gloved hands that had shoved her away without a moment of hesitation—Luella felt indebted to the male, even though she hated what that meant. Hated that he had lied to her. Hated that he had watched her.

Something cold and wet brushed over her chest.

"What is that?" Luella softly inquired.

It tickled but wasn’t unpleasant. If anything, it felt rather nice. Cool against her flushed skin.

She wondered if a red mark was left on her skin from the mage’s burning touch.

"A paste to speed up healing and soothe. A mixture of chamomile and turmeric," Tharen said.

The sound of his voice was far more soothing than the paste, but she would never divulge that information.

When the mage was not so intent on tormenting her, he was tolerable. He was gruff and more than a little deranged, but when he turned that single-minded focus on his medicine and practice, it was manageable. Alluring, almost—the way his hands moved with practice and skill as he put together tinctures, cleared off his work table and treated wounds with care.

Luella hummed. "That feels nice."

Graves stiffened under her but didn’t say anything.

"The King is back on castle grounds." Bastian cleared his throat.

Graves nodded like he wasn’t surprised the vampire was keeping tabs on King Vale’s whereabouts.

Through his Mind magic, she was sure Bastian could do a manner of things, including tracking those he had a link with.

It didn’t make it any less strange for them to be so in tune with each other, though.

Tharen lifted the brush from her skin. The bowl was set down on his work table with a small clatter as he turned back to her.

"Now for the hard part." He sighed. "Bastian, Graves. You know what to do."

Her outstretched arm was transferred from Bastian’s hesitant grip to Tharen’s unyielding one. She gritted her teeth.

Heart fluttering anxiously in her chest, Luella shifted her eyes to Az. He nodded, assuring her. A brown curl fell over his forehead, and his amber

eyes never left hers, even as Tharen grabbed her wrist. She grew lightheaded from the pain as it tugged and pulled against her socket.

She whimpered.

Bastian uttered a soft, "I’m sorry."

"Try to relax your muscles. It will hurt less that way," Tharen instructed.

"I-I’m trying," she managed, fear mingling with the promise of pain and clouding her senses.

Graves notched a finger under her chin and moved her face back to his.

When did she stop looking at him?

"You heard him. Relax, sweetheart," Graves whispered. "Just keep those eyes on me and breathe."

Luella tried, she really did.

She measured her breaths and forced her muscles to relax and counted the various shades of blue in Graves’s eyes. But when Tharen shifted his grip on her arm, all common sense left her and was replaced by radiating waves of heavy pain.

"Steady." Tharen’s fingers bit into her skin.

Bastian and Graves gripped her fiercely, the latter murmuring her name like a prayer.

Then, without another warning, Tharen snapped her arm out by his grip on her wrist, tugging it out and down.

White-hot pain lanced down her side, and even with the help of the tonic, it wasn’t enough to combat the sharp agony. Eyes falling closed, Luella sunk deep into her mind, blissful darkness overtaking her.

The last thing she saw was irises the same shade as the deep ocean in the winter.

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A GIFTED FEATHER

Something was truly amiss here.

Luella pulled the blanket higher over her head, the thick comforter blocking out the dim moonlight filtering in through the windows, leaving her in an inky darkness.

Well, what would have been darkness if not for the small chamberstick cradled in her palm.

She smiled as the little flames danced above the wick, illuminating the space where she was curled up under her covers with a soft glow. With her other hand, Luella gripped the book, fingers spreading over the pages as she scoured the contents for clues.

Luella eyed the tiny scratches along the back of her hand and the faint bruising over her elbow, which faded more and more every day. She shifted against the pillows, golden tendrils of her hair tickling against her temples and shoulders. She could barely find a comfortable position with the soreness in her body. Wiggling this way and that, trying to alleviate the ache on her side.

But she would not complain—she was just grateful that she had healed so quickly after the attack with Tharen's attentiveness.

It had been a week since the nameless army had descended upon the castle, and the throne room had ended up in shambles. Besides the lingering yellow of healing bruises over her side—localized at her arm socket and over her breastbone—and the pressing soreness, she was fine.

After waking up in her bed the morning after Tharen had healed her, Luella had spent the next few days curled up and sequestered away while the others left her alone for once. Besides Bastian, popping in to bring her pastries and more books, staring at her with those red-tinted eyes and a quirk to his plush lips before he would leave, glances lingering on her chest and the bruises there. She thought at first he had been staring at her neck and her veins, but when she had caught him with such a sorrowful expression, cool fingertips tracing over the mottled purples and yellows, she had realized he was saddened by her pain, her hurt.

Luella was not sure what to think about that—her captor feeling sorry for her.

In this gilded cage, she was granted a small reprieve of solitude, spending her time pacing and thinking, and thinking and pacing.

Theorizing and reading…

And no matter how hard she thought, it all led back to the same place. The same *word*.

Umbra.

In the orange glowing silence under her covers, the chamberstick held in hand, she mouthed the word, scared to utter it too loudly. Tasting it on her tongue, feeling her lips press together around the soundless name.

Luella bit her lip and brought the book closer to her face. Her cheek rubbed against the silk of the pillowcase as she nestled against it, shifting to get more comfortable.

The paper of the journal was yellowed with time, but the pages were strong under her touch. Luella couldn’t find anything more than she had read when she was in the library with Nyx. An entity called the *Umbra*. And an elusive *he*.

A long sigh fell from her lips, making the flames of the candle flicker precariously with her breath. Tiny embers danced above the flames, the metal of the chamberstick warm in her palm, and she watched those flames unblinking, her eyes growing teary, but she refused to move her gaze and give in, too wrapped up in swirls of thoughts.

She would have to go back to the library, back to Nyx. There had to be more than this singular book. More information.

Something, at least.

Luella would settle for scraps if it would help her figure out what was going on here. Why the attackers that had stormed the castle acted as if they

were possessed… Why some of the revelers turned on each other. And why no one else found it strange.

She had thought Serpentis's might was unparalleled, but after the events of court, Luella wondered if the kingdom was as susceptible to outsiders waging an attack as the fae were.

As she read through the pages of the journal detailing war and grief, Luella couldn't help but find it almost an exact mirror of everything happening now—the wars, the fighting, species at odds, and peculiarities she couldn't even begin to fathom.

Strange how much could stay the same over time.

Stagnant waters stretching across years, untouched and always the same. Hands skimmed over the surface from across various periods but never caused a ripple. Time was strange. And history, even more so—it always found a way to repeat itself.

"You're to have dinner with the King tonight."

Luella groaned, the back of her hand swiping over her forehead as she squinted against the assault of fleeting daylight against her tired eyes. It was far too bright, even with the approach of dusk.

She had spent all night reading the journal and had fallen asleep with her cheek pressed into the worn pages. Little creases were still on the sides of her face where her skin had smushed against the book as she slept.

"Up, up," Osa called, her red hair like a flame around her.

Ina went to prepare a bath while Osa dragged Luella out of bed and to her bathing chambers with a steel grip on her upper arm, her bruised skin flaring under the maid's unforgiving touch.

Her chest throbbed in remembrance of pain as she dropped her nightgown to the floor, the thin straps cascading down her shoulders and the silk fabric pooling at her feet. Her skin pebbled with the chill of the room, and she sank into the water quickly, letting the warmth soak into her bones and dispel the tension in her muscles.

With Ina and Osa's help, Luella bathed quickly. She had a practiced routine down, and in no time, her skin was scrubbed pink and flushed from the warmth of the water, her hair sparkling and frizz-free, half of it swept

back with a jeweled comb while the rest tumbled down her shoulders. A silken robe was wrapped around her as she waited for Ina to rouge her cheeks and bring color back to her pale complexion.

Caged and cooped up as she had been, Luella's skin had lost the healthy, sun-kissed glow it almost always had back in Solis—from days spent reading under the sun or daydreaming beneath puffy white clouds. Now, she looked so pale she could see the faint lines of greenish-blue veins on the underside of her wrists. It took a good bit of rouge to make her face look lively.

Ina brushed the red paint over Luella's cheekbones, a soft smile on her lips. A short strand of light brown hair untucked from behind the maid's ear as she leaned forward, face pinched in concentration as she used a soft-bristled brush to outline red on Luella's bitten lips.

Osa brought in a dress for the evening, holding it up with a hand as her other fluffed out the skirts, dusting off pieces of imaginary lint from the ruffles of dark blue fabric.

Luella's throat bobbed as she stared at the gown, Ina patting her cheek to force her to be still. The gown was a lapis lazuli shade—the same shade as a certain raven shifter's keen eyes.

Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. She wondered if Graves would be there tonight.

She bit her lip as her traitorous mind thought, *What if King Vale would be there tonight?*

Ina chastised her again, poking Luella's bottom lip with the blunt end of the brush, forcing her to free it from between her teeth.

"Sorry," Luella breathed.

The female didn't respond, of course, merely went back to placing the finishing touches on her face. A little kohl on Luella's eyes, a shimmer of silver dust on her lids, and then Ina pulled away with a bright smile, flashing a hint of white teeth. It made her soft cheeks puff out, showcasing a tiny dimple on each side.

Luella felt herself smile in turn. It was hard not to. Ina's quiet nature only made her more endearing, coupled with the way she seemed to care for Luella.

She had never had friends before, but she wondered if she would ever be able to find something of the sort with Ina…

Osa roughly tugged the knotted tie on Luella’s robe free, jerking her from her thoughts as the silk covering her fluttered open and bared her gleaming, flushed skin.

She felt her nipples pebbling from the slight coolness; her cheeks reddened as the fiery maid tugged the sleeves of the robe off of her, leaving her standing bare in the center of the room. Her shoulders curved forward as she crossed an arm over her chest.

The door to the balcony was open, and the sheer curtains fluttered in the evening breeze, sweeping in a faint scent of salt air and a slight tang of sweetness from the apple orchards on the outskirts of the castle grounds.

Luella breathed in deep, lungs filling with what felt like her first real breath in ages.

Ina tapped her shoulder once before pointing toward the door, letting Luella know she was leaving. A golden curl tickled at Luella’s cheek as she nodded, and Ina left, taking her little basket of beauty supplies with her.

Osa tsked under her breath. "That’s not right," she grumbled.

"What is it?" Luella asked.

The maid curled her lip, tugging at the hem of the dress, hurriedly patting it down. "It’s wrinkled. That simply won’t do." Her deeper voice rasped as she groused, completely ignoring Luella where she stood nude, waiting for Osa to let her cover herself back up with a dress. Or a robe, at least.

Luella wrapped her free arm around her middle; the other still banded across her breasts. Her hair brushed against her bare arms and over her back as she waited for Osa to start dressing her.

"I’ll need to go and fix this." Osa huffed and draped the gown over her arm.

And there went Luella’s hopes of speeding the evening alone so she could retire early, and hopefully sneak out during the night to go back to the library and speak with Nyx…

"It’s… It’s okay," Luella assured, holding out a hand for the dress.

The female raised a brow, the green of her eyes shining in the candlelight. "King Vale doesn’t like anything less than imperfection. I won’t be long. Sit." She pointed at the chair in front of the vanity. "Don’t mess anything up."

And with that, the maid left. Luella still heard her grumbles even after the door clicked shut behind her.

She didn’t even get a chance to protest as the maid took both her robe *and* the dress with her, leaving Luella stuck in the room cold and bare. She eyed the wardrobe but didn’t dare seek a covering from within—the maid would likely strike Luella in a place easily hidden if she dared disobey.

A quiet rustle of fabric pulled her attention to the doors of the balcony.

The wind was howling, with soft echoes and loud groans, growing more furious as the daylight grew dimmer. From where the fabric parted in the fluttering of the breeze, Luella watched the fleeting, orange glows of the sun as the moon rose to take its place. The sea stretched on in the distance, and the waves crashed against tall walls of stone and rockfaces.

She inched closer, peering out into the slow cresting hues of purple, mingling with the pinks of sunset.

Luella always loved both the sun and the moon. One couldn’t *be* without the other. Each worked in tandem to keep everything alive. And just like the moon and the sun, Luella loved everything under their watchful eyes—the crashing sea, the salty breeze, the apple orchards, the empty fireplace like a yawning pit on the far side of the room, just like the pit of her magicless soul. Luella wished she could light it and ward off the chill, relax against the plush rug at the hearth until her lids grew drowsy and the anxiety of the looming dinner left her.

A soft caw made her eyes shoot open with a start.

Luella hadn’t even realized she had closed them, but the soft daydream playing in her head had made her hazy and sated with the temptation of it all.

A black raven sat perched right outside the fluttering drapes of the balcony doors, tiny feet gripping the rail.

Her mouth popped open in embarrassment, and she quickly grabbed the corner of the curtain to use as a covering. The slightly translucent fabric didn’t offer much to cover her nude body, but it was enough to soothe her mind. Enough to not make her feel so… exposed.

Luella peeked around the curtain, thighs crossing under the fabric to hide the space between her legs.

"What are y-you doing here?"

The raven cawed in answer, blue eyes shimmering with mirth as he cocked his head. He playfully hopped along the rail, coming closer and closer to her. She backed up, tugging the curtain right along with her, feet tangled up in the fabric.

"No." Luella held up a finger to ward him off. "Stay away."

The raven let out a soft caw in protest, wings fluttering, but he made no move to come closer, likely sensing the urgency in her tone.

"This is the second time that you've snooped on me."

A foot stamped on the stone perch as if to say, *the second time that you know of.*

She gritted her teeth, the side of her mouth curling up in a tiny snarl.

Black feathered wings ruffled out, amused by her attempt at anger. Poking her tongue in her cheek, she stomped forward, almost forgetting about her indecent state, before the flush to her cheeks grew hotter. Her steps halted as she tugged the curtains down over the swell of her backside and over the soft curve of her hip.

Luella raised her finger again. "Stop spying on me! I'm not… decent." She bit her lip, all too aware of her nudity under the flimsy excuse of a covering.

The end of the curtain pulled up against her hip, stretching taut and clinging to her freshly bathed, oiled skin. It wrapped around her thighs and over her waist but dipped down over her chest, revealing the beginnings of a peaked, rosy nipple.

The raven cawed, keen eyes tracking the rise and fall of her chest. The swell of her breasts.

"Ah, wait. Just—" she floundered, skin growing warm under the raven's silent and watchful attention. She tried to regain her decorum. With a shaky hand, Luella gestured to the open evening sky and the apple orchards in the distance. "Just go."

Without warning, the raven stretched his wings and flew away, but not before a small black feather fluttered to the ground of the balcony—whirling in the wind, dancing around, and coming to rest right at the tips of her toes.

She peeked out into the evening sky and, when she saw no trace of the raven, bent to pick up the feather. The curtain rode high on the back of her thighs, leaving her in a completely indecent state. She ran a finger over the tip of the feather.

It was smooth and silky. The finest of downy with the scent of honey and spiced cloves.

Like the male himself.

In an act wholly unlike herself, Luella tucked the end of the feather into the back of her hair, nestling it right alongside the silver comb that swept up half of her golden curls.

To have a piece of Graves so close—

It made her feel…

Safe.

Aromatic spices mixed with buttery cloves and garlic made Luella’s mouth water.

She touched one of the utensils by her empty plate, finger tracing over the tiny whirls etched into the handle as she looked longingly at the feast spread on the table before her.

She must have had a funny look on her face because when she met Bastian’s eyes, he laughed.

"King Vale won’t be mad if you eat before he arrives, pet." The vampire waved a lazy hand to the tiered platter of finger foods—nuts, cheeses, berries, and tiny pieces of toasted bread to dip in the spread of sauces surrounding it.

Tharen kicked a booted foot up on the corner of the table, shooting the vampire, then Luella, a look. "I wouldn’t listen to him if I were you, little lamb. That one will get you into trouble."

"Only the good kind," Bastian countered. He placed his chin on his fist and blinked his attention over toward her, the red in his eyes muted after he had drank himself satisfied, no doubt. "The kind that you would willingly fall into."

She gulped under his intensity and diverted her sight back to the food. Luella’s mouth watered for an entirely different reason as she tried to forget the sensual promise laced within Bastian’s words.

"I don’t think I should seek out any trouble… but it does have a way of finding me," she said softly.

Luella was startled when the chair beside her was roughly pulled out, the legs clattering against the floor as a large body sat down with a huff.

From his spot next to her, Graves tugged down his cowl and looked at her from the corner of his eyes—the same eyes that had melted away the

sheer fabric of the curtain draped over her frame earlier. Her cheeks heated as she remembered his piercing stare, aware of how warm his body was next to hers, how his clothed thigh brushed against hers as he shifted his chair closer.

A gloved hand rose, and as careful as one might approach an injured fawn, he traced a fingertip over the feather she had tucked into the back of her curls, black peeking out from where the jewel-encrusted, silver comb kept strands pulled back away from her rouged cheekbones.

"This is pretty." His words were said low, like he wished to keep them hidden from Tharen and Bastian, both of whom watched with widened eyes as if the male that had dropped into the seat next to her was an imposter and not the enigmatic, silent raven shifter they knew.

She shivered as that gloved hand drifted down from her carefully styled curls and cupped her nape, brushing over her bare shoulders, exposed by the straps of her gown.

"But not as pretty as the one who wears it," Graves mumbled. He leaned closer, and Luella forced herself to stay where she was. To not shrink back from his nearness.

His eyes sparkled with the weight of a thousand unsaid words as he tucked a loose curl behind her arched ear.

The top two buttons of his silk, black shirt were unbuttoned, and she could see a white bandage peeking out through the tiny bit of exposed skin. Her stomach clenched at the memory of the sword driving through his shoulder.

The sound of her heart beating was far too loud in the hushed room. Graves’s lips brushed the shell of her ear as his mouth whispered over her skin, moving to her flushed cheek.

Pebbles of chill erupted on her skin, and she heard a low growl emit from the side of the table. Tharen slammed his legs down from where they were propped on the table, booted feet thumping on the ground as he gripped a butterknife with white knuckles.

"A sight even prettier was you unclothed. Wearing nothing but a sheer covering. I could see it all, sweetheart," Graves whispered into her ear. "The shades of the setting sun looked far more beautiful on your bare skin than the blues of this gown." He touched the strap of her dress, and she jolted from the unexpected graze against her oversensitized flesh.

Words were stolen from her. Never did Luella expect silent Graves to be so sauve.

"What’s the meaning of this?" The words bellowed throughout the room, making her feel like she was plunged into icy waters.

Luella jerked back from Graves, the male casually leaning away from her and tucking his gloved hand back into his lap. Like he didn’t just whisper the most achingly sensual compliment to her. Like he didn’t just admit to spying on her while she was dressing. To seeing her nude… and liking what he saw.

King Vale’s jaw clenched in ire as he entered the room. The crown atop his golden hair gleamed under the glow of the candlelight in the room, and he strode forward with confidence, eating up the distance between them far too quickly for Luella’s liking.

It was the first time she had seen the King in a week. The first time since his dragon form had staked a claim on her.

She didn’t know how King Vale would act now that his beastly counterpart had deemed her worthy of his care and single-minded, possessive focus. But she assumed this undeserved jealously over another male whispering none-too-sweet nothings in her ear was part of it.

"King Vale." Luella cleared her throat as he took his seat at the head of the table.

His green eyes sparked with anger as he took note of how close she was to Graves. The raven shifter arched a brow in challenge but remained silent, once more returning to his quiet and dutiful self.

From across the table, Bastian bit his lip, flicking his eyes up to hers as he tried to hold back his laughter. The sight of King Vale jealous must not have been common.

Bastian reached for a pitcher of red liquid and poured himself a tall drink, filling the wine glass with thick blood. It almost sloshed over the rim. He took greedy sips like he wished to drown himself in it and escape the disastrous dinner before him.

"Play nice," Bastian mumbled over the lip of the glass before taking another large sip.

Tharen coughed sharply like he was covering up a laugh of his own.

The King closed his eyes, jaw grinding as he tried to muster up patience. Luella didn’t envy *that* endeavor. She wasn’t sure how the male had dealt with this group for so long.

"Eat, Princess," King Vale ordered. He wasted no time before lifting the empty plate before him and filling it with an assortment of nuts and wedges of cheese, roasted spears of asparagus and carrot pieces, thick slices of buttered bread, and finishing it off with a few fresh strawberries topped with a dollop of cream.

Her stomach grumbled at the sight, but she waited for the King to finish before she filled her own plate.

King Vale pushed back his chair at the head of the table, taking the full platter with him. She watched as he rounded the side and passed by where Graves was still pressed against her, the raven shifter's jeweled eyes watching with rare amusement.

"Oh," she breathed, surprised when King Vale pulled out the empty chair at her other side and sat without a preamble.

He sat the platter of food in front of her with a slight clang as it hit the table.

"For you," King Vale said.

"I—" she tried again. "Thank you?" It came out more like a question.

The King's lips twitched, and in a gesture that was entirely against the poise she thought him to have, he leaned his head against his hand and watched her with rapt attention.

"I hope you like it. No meat. I know you don't like to eat meat. But the bread is very good. The cooks make the butter fresh."

Was he… rambling?

"Thank you, King Vale." Luella hesitantly lifted a piece of bread, taking a tiny nibble off the corner. She hummed under her breath. It *was* good.

He seemed pleased she was eating what he had provided for her. It must be some strange dragon thing.

"How are your injuries?" King Vale brushed a hand along her arm, across the yellowing bruises revealed by her gown, and she swore a visible path was left in the wake of his touch—that's how changed she felt but the simple brush of his skin against hers.

"Almost healed. I'm not even sore anymore." *Mostly*, she amended in her mind, thinking of the few aches that still pestered her when she moved wrong. Luella eyed his broad shoulders, looking for any hint of a bruise or bandage that would reveal if he had sustained any injuries. "And you? Are you hurt?" She speared a roasted carrot on her utensil and bit into it.

King Vale placed another piece of cheese on the platter before her, and she immediately lifted it to her lips for a bite. Soft yet nutty, it coated her tongue. She felt parched from all the rich saltiness.

Luella reached for a glass of wine, but Graves beat her to it, his gloved hands knocking hers away as he lifted the glass to her lips. She tried to take it from him, but he wouldn’t allow it, tugging it away from her grip and placing the lip firmly against her lips, leaving her no choice but to open up and allow the liquid to flow into her mouth, all by his hand.

Mild tartness cooled her flushed skin and chased away the dryness in her mouth.

Luella tapped his wrist, done drinking. She didn’t want to become intoxicated, not here, in front of them. Graves pulled away with a curious, dark haze upon his features as he stared intently at her mouth.

"No." The King laughed darkly. "*I’m* not hurt." The way he emphasized his words told her all she needed to know. He wasn’t hurt. But his enemies were.

She shuddered as she remembered the decapitated dragon head falling to be swallowed up by the dark ocean waves.

From the way the group carried on, it only cemented the fact that *this*—whatever it was—wasn’t out of the ordinary.

The attacks. The bloodshed.

And Luella was the only one in the dark, and she vowed to remedy it as soon as possible.

Maybe if she could see Az again, would he know something?

Bastian pulled her from her thoughts as he slid a plump, red cherry on a little napkin across the table. A sensual smile played upon his even more sensual lips, and he lifted the glass of blood to his mouth, robbing her of looking upon the delightful sight of his amusement any longer. He winked as he tilted his glass, a line of red dribbling from his lips and down his chin. He didn’t take his gaze off of her as he wiped his thumb over it and lifted it to his lips, sucking it between his teeth.

Her face warmed, and she reached for a distraction and lifted the cherry by the stem, popping it into her mouth and sucking on the red skin as she let the taste linger on her tongue before swallowing.

The others grew silent for a moment, and she felt heavy stares on her for some reason. King Vale clinked the end of a knife against his glass, breaking up the peculiar bout of terseness that rippled through the air.

Dinner continued for the next little while.

Stilted conversations; lingering, heated touches; a terse air permeating the room like a thick cloud of smoke. No one spoke of the attack besides the brief mention of King Vale asking about her injuries. And every time Luella felt compelled to open her mouth and spew the litany of questions teaming under the surface at the occupants of the room, she thought better of it and bit her tongue, silencing herself with small sips of wine.

Tharen and Bastian whispered to each other across the table, occasionally shooting curious glances at where she was sandwiched between Graves and the King. The whispering was for her benefit, alone. Their low tones were quiet enough to hide from her ears, but not the sharp ears of King Vale and Graves.

Every time she bit into a delicious piece of fruit or perfectly cooked vegetable, she couldn’t help but think of Az, alone in the dungeons and living off of stale, hard chunks of bread and old water from rusty tins.

She pushed away her plate, suddenly full and queasy, unable to stomach anything else.

"Are you finished, Princess?" King Vale asked.

"Yes." Luella nodded, sullen, and tucked her hands under her thighs as she waited for the evening to be over.

Just because the King was suddenly being cordial to her, and Graves had saved her by stepping in front of a sword meant for her demise, that did not mean she was at peace here. Safe here.

Luella wanted to get out. And she would find a way. She just had to go back to the library again and see Nyx. Which she could have been doing if not for this impromptu dinner.

She was hinging her whole plan of escape on the library, she knew. But she didn’t have anything else to give her hope. Didn’t know what she would do if it led to a dead end…

"I think I should retire for the evening," Luella announced softly.

King Vale grew stiff beside her, gripping the stem of his wine glass so hard she feared it may break. "It’s so early. Stay." It wasn’t a request but a demand.

Graves stroked a finger down her arm, drawing her attention to her other side. As she turned her head, she felt something hot whisper over her back. It felt like a breath. Her eyes widened, curious, as she looked back to the King.

What she saw made her jerk back into Graves, almost toppling her chair over as she tried to get away from the dragon shifter at her side.

Graves placed a gloved hand on her waist, settling her as she was tugged into him.

"W-what? What is it? What's wrong?" Luella's lip trembled as she was hit with the obvious truth: she would never be safe in this den of dragons.

Black smoke curled from King Vale's nostrils, his eyes lit with dancing embers, turning the green into smoking, jeweled emeralds, forged over hot coals into mere liquid. Burning, burning. So hot she thought she may melt under the intensity of being pinned under them—pinned by *him*.

"Where did you get that?" King Vale gritted out through his teeth. Smoke furled in the air between them, and tension popped and sparked like crackling cinders.

"Get what?" Luella asked.

King Vale's hand shot up, quick as a flash, as he reached to pluck the feather from the back of her hair. She flinched into Graves, shoulders curling inward as her back hit the raven shifter's broad chest.

The space between the King's brows crinkled in confusion as he held the black raven feather between them.

He had been talking about the feather?

"From Graves," she revealed, allowing herself to be pulled back further into said male's embrace. She was almost on his lap but found she didn't mind it.

A growl rumbled from deep within the King's chest, smoke curling in the air just like it had in his dragon form.

"You're jealous," Graves said from behind Luella.

And suddenly, she understood.

King Vale did not deny it, only stared at the way she was flush against Graves's chest, his arm resting over her shoulder.

He was jealous, as though she was a toy stolen from him and he, a mere petulant, spoiled babe, used to getting whatever he wished.

Tharen barked a sharp laugh, unable to hold it back any longer. "Well, fuck me. I never thought this day would come."

"What?" Bastian grinned. "The bastard actually showing care for something other than his hoard?"

Graves grew stiff behind her, and King Vale shot his molten green eyes over to the two laughing males.

"Hey!" Luella protested as Graves tugged her fully away from her chair and into his lap, his large, gloved palms flattening against her stomach. A pressing heat below her navel; her thighs clenched, heart fluttering from the touch.

That was all the warning she got before the King shot forward in a blur, large arm sweeping out across the table and knocking over half-full wine glasses and towers of assorted pastries the kitchen had brought out for dessert.

Bastian’s pitcher of blood tipped over toward her, red rivulets soaking the tablecloth and dropping onto her lap. A few splatters got on the back of Graves’s gloved hand that pressed over her stomach, and he growled, removing his hand momentarily to tug off the dirtied glove with his teeth, spitting it out on the floor. Now bare, his hot palm caressed her chest, ghosting over the yellowed bruising on her arm socket and breastbone as he gave King Vale his full attention, male satisfaction and pride evident in the raven shifter’s posture as he cradled her to him.

Luella felt herself grow weak under his careful, exploratory touches, her back sinking into his chest further.

Tharen barked another laugh, and the King reached across the ruinous table to wrap a hand around the mage’s throat. Tharen did not bat an eye, as though he was used to such explosive violence—craved it even, from the way he licked his lips.

"The real feast has just begun," Tharen said, lips curling up in a wicked grin. He made no move to shrug off the King’s touch, just sat back and waited.

King Vale’s grip tightened, knuckles near white as his tongue poked his cheek, hot fury radiating off of him in waves.

"Fuck!" the King cursed, ripping his hand away from Tharen and settling heavily back into his seat.

The whole exchange made Luella confused. King Vale was known for his cruelty. If he was angered by the words of anyone—let alone his court—he should have no qualms about putting them in their place. But it was like he was being physically held back from making a move against the mage.

Bastian was still as stone in his seat, not at all amused like Tharen was.

King Vale pointed an angry finger at the pair before swinging it over to where Luella was nestled in Graves’s lap, the raven shifter’s fingers clenched against her stomach, making her throat grow dry.

"Be grateful that I cannot—" The King stopped himself from continuing, looking to Luella. "Be grateful," was all he said before roughly pushing his chair back and standing. He stopped by Luella, lifting the feather and tucking it behind her ear.

She watched him leave with a frown on her lips.

If he was so jealous by the sight of the feather, why did he willingly give it back to her?

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HOW TO KISS

Pages rustled under her hands.

Luella attempted to pull her mind back to the story in front of her, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't. Her attention kept being stolen by the shadowed edges of the library… To what she knew lay within.

Graves reclined on the plush chair next to her, his hood pulled over his head to hide most of his features from her. But even so, Luella could feel the weight of his eyes burning on her skin.

She tapped a finger on the spine of the book. A gentle *tap tap tap* that sounded far too loud in the hush of the room.

Water trickled into the pool, the splash echoing each hollow thud of her finger against the spine, reverberating in time with the huffs of her breath and the slight swish of the pillow behind her as she shifted.

Luella slammed the book shut and sat up, back pressing against the wall as she pulled her knees to her chest.

"Irritable little thing," Graves mumbled from beside her; though, he still didn't move his head, posture stoically set.

Luella started, touching a hand against her mouth. "It's… difficult to concentrate with someone watching your every move."

Graves finally tilted his head toward her; his eyes shone from within the folds of his cloak. "I find it hard to believe that is what's bothering you." He

lifted the book and absentmindedly flipped through the pages. “You’ve spent your whole life being watched.”

He wasn’t wrong.

Luella had been born under watchful eyes and grew up with at least some sort of attention always on her, tracking her every movement. But none so piercing as that from the male beside her.

She felt like Graves knew her every thought and every emotion. Every hidden desire and whim.

Bastian had been inside her mind and knew of her dreams, but Tharen knew the ways her body worked with his magic—every little thrum of her heart or pathway of blood flowing in her veins.

King Vale knew of her courage. Her pride. With his possessive claim, the King realized that she could be just as prideful and obstinate as he, but the difference was that Luella knew when to acquiesce and when to buck against those brutish feelings.

Az knew of Luella’s heart; the demon understood things about her affections that Luella had never even begun to grasp—the tiniest sparks of blossoming love. Fragile, nestled between joint palms with care, waiting for one perfect spark before it ignited into an inferno of a fiery blaze.

But Graves…

Graves knew of her secrets.

And somehow, that was the most dangerous thing of them all.

Just this once, Luella gave into that stubborn pride.

“Being watched and being watched by *you* are two different things, Graves.” She said his name like a curse and a prayer.

“Tell me, when you wore my feather proudly in front of them all, did you do it with the intent to make them mad with jealousy?”

Luella paused, flustered by the question. “I did it because you"—her head thumped on the wall behind her, eyes squeezing shut as she forced out between gritted teeth—"saved me." Studying the little pinpricks of light behind her closed lids, she tried not to move when Graves brushed a gloved hand over her neck, shivers wracking her frame. “And it made me feel safe. Even though I know it shouldn’t have. Even though you are one I should feel anything but safe with." The careful admittance fell from her anxiously bitten lips, one the male took great pleasure in, Luella was sure.

Just being in his presence made her say things that were better left buried down—far down—in the magicless pit of her soul.

Something tickled her cheek.

Her eyes sprung open.

Graves brushed the soft tip of an inky black feather against her pale skin, smoothing it over her cheek and across her ear with a hushed focus.

It made light strokes over Luella's skin, and a pink flush threatened to overtake her and give away the excitement thrumming through her veins.

She cleared her throat. "How is your wound?"

"You asked me that yesterday at dinner."

Graves continued trailing the feather down her neck, and Luella's heart thumped desperately in her chest. She wondered if he could hear it.

"I know, but I'm asking you again," she said.

She gave a breathy inhale when the feather tickled over her collarbone, skimming over her bruised flesh like he wished to brush the evidence of her pain away. Graves flipped it in his hand, using the pointed end to sweep away the strap of her gown.

Unsteadily, she said, "Without the eyes of the others. Just me and you. I'm asking again."

Graves leaned into her, his body making her dip to the side on the cushion. "I'll live. I couldn't have said the same for you. You fae are quite… delicate."

The raven shifter was far more forthcoming than Luella would have anticipated he would be. She bit her lip to stifle a gasp as Graves resumed brushing the soft end of the feather over her chest bone. Right over the healed fracture on her sternum, the skin there a darker purple, not yet the fainter yellows of the bruising over her shoulder.

"Were you worried about me?" Her breath hitched.

"Worried." Graves laughed. She could get drunk on the sound. "I'm always worried."

Her brow furrowed. She decided to risk one more question. "Who attacked us? All my studies of history and politics… Serpentis is *lethal*. Ruthless. Not just anyone would risk an attack. Much less be able to make it into the castle."

That was another piece of this strange puzzle that befuddled her—how did the attackers even make it successfully onto palace grounds?

With every word said, Luella realized it was a bad decision to give in to the burning questions within her.

Graves pulled the feather away from her skin—the absence of its soft touch made her mourn the fleeting piece of personality Graves had gifted her—and tucked it behind her ear, just like what King Vale did the night prior at dinner.

“In time,” Graves said with reluctance. “You’ll understand in time.”

He seemed as angered and overwhelmed as she was. As though he wanted to give in and answer everything she had thrown his way, but something held him back.

Luella felt like she could explode. From his nearness. From the weight of the questions within her.

From her anger.

“The Umbra.” The word was torn from her lips before she could stop it.

Graves stilled, deadly. “How do you know that name?”

Luella scooted away, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm, a vice-like grip forcing her to stay.

She could slap herself for her stupidity. Never reveal your full knowledge in the games of court and politics. But under Graves’s heady stare and sharply sweet scent, Luella was left dazed, drunk, confused, and far too pliant.

“The servants talk.” A tremor wracked her frame.

“Little listening ears.” Graves nipped the tip of her arched ear. She shuddered, wrapped up in his spell. “You’re far too observant for your own good, sweetheart.” He grew contemplative and huffed a laugh, but this one was less seductive and more bitter. “Far too much like me.”

Now that he said it, Luella understood.

They *were* alike.

Maybe that’s why she had such a hard time with him—more than the others. They were both quiet. Both careful with their words.

There was an art to choosing when to speak, and they both were practiced in it, masters of the dance that was intuition and spoken word.

She saw herself in all of them. At least a little, as far as Tharen was concerned. Luella wasn’t sure how she might be similar to Tharen, the mad male he was.

Turning her head, Luella looked deep into Graves’s eyes. Far deeper than she had ever dared before.

“You’re just like me." Her words were a quiet breath floating between the scant space of their faces. “And I’m just like you. We’re both quiet, but

by choice. Not in fear of not knowing what to say, but in fear of knowing exactly what to say. Knowing too much, all of the time."

Graves ghosted a gloved finger down the side of her cheek. All the anger from her questions fled from his visage, leaving him with only one emotion flickering over his face: desire.

Their faces were a fraction apart when he murmured, "I'm going to kiss you."

It wasn't a question but a statement. A firm demand. Even in captivity, with her rights and freedom stripped from her, Luella found herself wanting to willingly give this one piece away to one of her choosing.

She found herself not caring that he demanded to take, just as he took part in stripping her of freedom, her old life. Another choice robbed from her, but just this once, she was okay with it.

Luella liked that she wasn't given a choice in this matter.

"I don't know how," Luella uttered and looked down, cheeks heating. "I've never…"

Graves tipped her chin up. Without breaking eye contact, he pulled his hand away and gently tugged off his glove. He laid it on her lap, the thick leather scorching against her thighs.

"Close your eyes." Her eyes fluttered shut at Graves's command. "Don't move." Luella grew still as stone.

A light touch brushed against her lips. It tickled, similar to the feeling of the feather against her skin, but more alive. Warm breath hit her lips, and she knew then he was kissing her. A mere brush of his lips against hers. Not a real kiss, but her bones felt too light to be trapped inside her skin, something thrumming deep within her, threatening to burst free.

She didn't know if she liked it yet or not. It felt too personal. Too intimate.

Even after he pulled away from her lips, he was still too close, his brow resting against hers.

After taking her first kiss from her, as light as it was, he surged forward with a whetted appetite as his control snapped.

His mouth devoured hers.

Luella stayed utterly still, back pressed against the wall as Graves crowded her against it, his warm, bare fingers tracing over her face, memorizing the slope of her nose, her soft cheeks, the curve of her jaw. Like he wished to commit the shape of her to his memory. Those calloused

hands that were capable of such violence treated her with utter care. The stubble on his jaw scratched against her chin, and something about it made everything feel all the more real. Every part of her narrowed into focus on where his lips touched hers.

She let out a soft, breathy sigh against him. The sound escaped into his mouth as he bit her lips into a swollen, red plushness. Her mouth was closed, even as Graves licked against the seam, demanding entry. But she wasn't sure she wanted to grant it.

If he wasn't willing to share his secrets, then she wasn't willing to give him any more of her.

Two could play the game of withholding.

His mouth pressed against hers, and her answering kiss was hesitant and unskilled, a fumbling, uncoordinated thing. She didn't know how to move her lips against his, where to put her hands, or what to do with that novel thrum of atavistic need.

It was a mercurial kiss. Shifting from a stoic, close-mouthed foray to an all-consuming capture.

As Graves's bare hand traced over her flushed skin, Luella tried not to remember the fact that he had seen her. All of her.

From his perch outside the window, one in Serpentis and one from her old life in Solis. And that was what she was aware of. Luella didn't know if he had spied on her outside those two occurrences, but she wouldn't put it past him.

Graves kissed the way he watched, intently and intimately. Giving Luella his sole focus as he laid claim to much more than just her first kiss—with every pass of his lips over hers, it was as though he took the most private of her desires from her. Seeing all the things she wished for but never dared to hope she could grasp.

He pulled back, forehead pressing against hers as they both caught their breath. Her lips tingled.

"Gods," Graves breathed raggedly. "Addicting. Your scent." He kissed her cheeks, the temperature simmering between them as his nose pressed against her skin. "Your taste." Graves leaned down to give an open-mouthed kiss to the hollow of her throat, and Luella's heart stuttered.

Maybe she did like kissing.

Teeth nipped against her sensitive flesh, but she tried not to feel utterly bereft as he pulled away from her lips completely and gave her neck and the

hollow of her throat attentive care.

The shadow of his stubble scratched against her neck. It felt nice. A tiny gasp was torn from her lips, and Graves let out a low groan at the needy sound.

"Fuck, you don’t know what you’re doing," he mumbled against her skin, pressing close-mouthed pecks down her throat, turning her into mush.

She tried not to feel offended by his words. He had kissed *her*, after all.

"I told you I don’t know how to kiss." Was that her voice? Luella didn’t sound like herself. Her words were breathy, and she sounded absolutely debauched, merely from the kissing.

"To me." Graves nipped at her throat. "You don’t know what you’re doing *to me*."

The admission was startling loud between them, yet heartbreaking from how quietly he uttered it. Graves didn’t admit that Luella simply affected him but that she held power over him.

He wrapped both arms around her shoulders and pulled her into him like he wished to devour her whole. Graves’s nose pressed along the fluttering pulse point at Luella’s neck, and he held her to him, keeping her at his mercy as they both luxuriated in the feel of their bodies pressed together.

Luella’s head fell back, neck exposed. Graves’s scent grew stronger, spiced honey and cloves sticking to her hair and clothes. Her skin.

He grumbled as he nosed along her neck. She felt like she might die from the feel of him. His scent wrapped around her.

Graves rose to meet her half-lidded stare. Holding eye contact with him was akin to a blood vow in a way. Unequivocally binding.

"I fear that you’ll ruin everything," Graves whispered. "Centuries of careful planning, ruined by the very one that sparked it all."

Luella was taken aback by his profession. Weighted words that held meaning to him, but none to her—she wanted it to, though. Wanted to chip away at the outermost layer of his words and unveil the hidden meaning.

"What do… What do you mean?" she asked.

His kiss-swollen, slick lips parted, expression pained; he looked ready to give in to whatever it was that was causing him such grief, making him unable to say what he desired.

"Graves!" A harsh voice barked the raven shifter’s name—

And everything stopped.

Luella jerked away from Graves like she had been burned, his back going ramrod straight as he forced himself away from her.

The raven shifter stood, putting far too much space between them. She felt splayed open and vulnerable. She wanted him close.

Graves paced near the pool of water, little droplets from the stream splashing his clothes as he said without inflection, "Bastian."

The vampire in question looked perturbed. And so very angry.

Luella bit her bottom lip; her flesh was swollen and slightly sore. The pain, grounding.

"Leave," Bastian gritted out between his teeth.

Graves nodded like he knew the demand was coming. He ran a shaky hand through his hair, ruffling the black strands. He cast one last, searching look at where Luella was sitting, disheveled on the seat, before he stormed out of the library.

Graves left so fast he didn’t even take his glove with him. It was still on her lap, burning a hole through her dress. Luella picked it up, running a finger down the worn, rough material.

"Luella," Bastian called. She looked up at the sound of her name. Bastian stood near the doorway of the library, the red in his eyes glowing from across the room. "I’ll escort you back to your room."

She stood on shaky legs and walked toward him, silent and morose. His eyes flicked down to her lips, and her tongue flicked out to run along the seam of them unconsciously. She tasted honey on herself. Bastian let out a low groan, eyes shuttering closed and face pinched.

Was he angry at her?

He shouldn’t be.

She wanted to tell Bastian that Graves had taken her lips without giving her a choice, but she feared what he might say—that she seemed pleased for someone who had been supposedly violated…

It had not been her choice, but Luella did not know if she would change anything about it if she had the opportunity.

So, she remained quiet, Graves’s glove still gripped in her hands.

Bastian didn’t say a word. They were both soundless as he led her back to her room for the night, and Luella was left with a strange ache low in her stomach, barely able to pay attention as Bastian fled from her, the door slamming shut in her face. And she was trapped.

Back in her cage.

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LITANY OF LOST, FALLEN THINGS

The library was dark this time of night.

As Luella danced gracefully through the maze of tall shelves, her eyes strained in the darkness.

Where was Nyx?

The sky was blanketed in a thick fog of clouds and haze. Barely any light filtered in through the glass dome above, and Luella paid extra care to each step she took. An unlit chamberstick was a weight in her palm, but she didn't dare light in—in fear of it acting as a beacon and drawing unnecessary attention to herself, where she was skirting along tall stacks of disordered tomes and towering shelves stuffed to the brim.

Luella huffed a sigh, annoyed.

She had hoped to stumble upon Nyx just as easily as she had the first time, but she guessed not everything would be that simple, would it?

She absentmindedly brushed a finger over her lips as she walked. A blush warmed her cheeks as she remembered the night prior. She and Graves had sat in this very library, and he had taken her first kiss. Barely a full day had passed since, and it seemed all Luella could dream of was the taste of him on her, the scent of him wrapped around her.

Her hands traced over the many shelves, and she came to the bend that led to the tiny, hidden spot Nyx had shown her.

Squeezing through the small shelves, Luella angeled the chamberstick above her cloaked head to fit through the space.

The greenery was thick in this part of the library, and a tiny vine brushed against her arm. She bit back a squeal. Not being able to see well in the dark of the area, her traitorous mind conjured up images of spindly hands and pointed teeth.

Nyx *had* said that there was a network of tunnels deep underground, and some entryways could be found in the library. Luella wondered what it would take for one to stumble into the vast tunnels and find their way into the palace. What if that’s how the attackers made their way inside?

She shuddered, suddenly aware of how alone she was here, in the darkness of the quiet alcove.

Her hands grappled for purchase on the slimy stone walls, and she carefully stepped over puddles of stagnant water and patches of slippery moss.

A sconce flickered with a faint flame, the brass handle fixing it to the wall was twined with vines, holding it like a gentle hand.

Tucked far in the back of the library, Luella felt safe enough to light her candle. She lifted the chamberstick and put the wick to the flame. It ignited with ease, casting shadows across the backs of her hands where they stuck out from the folds of her cloak.

The alcove was untouched, looking just as it had when she had been here with Nyx. Walls of stone, combined with overflowing shelves, coupled with spurts of greenery and the musty scent of old water.

Just when she thought she may never stumble upon the little sprite, she heard the faintest titter of laughter.

"Nyx," Luella called in a hushed whisper.

She heard a faint gasp, then a buzzing sound similar to the rapid beating of a hummingbird’s wings.

A whirlwind of shimmering green and bronze almost made her stagger back, but Luella caught herself with a hand against the wall.

"Lu!" exclaimed the sprite. Nyx perched on one of the shelves, dark green hair falling over her shoulders in little silken curls as she cocked her head, curious, watching Luella. "I’ve been waiting for you."

"I’m sorry," Luella said, biting her lip. "It was… hard for me to find a moment to visit you again."

Nyx hummed under her breath, twiddling with a leaf in her delicate hands. "No matter. You’re here now."

The sprite gasped suddenly, shooting away from where she was sitting and hovering midair in front of Luella.

Careful to keep the lit candle in her grasp away from the sprite, Luella angled the chamberstick off to the side, casting her and Nyx both in a dim glow of orange, mingled with the thick shadows of the alcove.

"Did you read the book I gave you?" the sprite asked impishly.

"No. I’m sorry. I truly haven’t had the time yet." Luella looked down, chagrined.

Nyx’s head dipped forward, eyes glistening and lower lip jutted out. Luella sighed, unable to stop herself from cooing over how cute the sprite was.

Nyx mumbled, "That’s okay."

"I will soon. I promise."

The sprite looked up. Placated, for now.

Her energy was infectious; she couldn’t help but feel completely at ease in Nyx’s presence.

Luella felt a rare grin curve break free.

"I’m here for your help again." Luella procured the journal from within the folds of her cloak and presented it to the sprite. "I want to find more books like this one. It was interesting. How long ago the words must have been written; the history was far more telling than a simple history book. To hear a personal recounting…"

Luella stopped herself from saying anything further. She still had to be careful with her word choice in front of the sprite. Nyx answered to Tharen —her so-called master—and Luella didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing.

Nyx gave a tiny nod, leaves falling from her hair. "Of course, I can help you." The sprite smiled, her two front teeth poking into her bottom lip.

Luella’s shoulders sagged, thankful for her help.

Maybe, *just maybe*, she could learn what was truly going on and escape.

She had to.

For Az.

Her knees ached.

Luella stretched her hands above her head, the billowy sleeves of her cloak falling to her elbows and exposing the expanse of her skin.

A yawn threatened to crack her jaw in half.

She and Nyx had been scouring the shelves in the hidden alcove for what felt like hours. But Luella knew it couldn’t have been that long.

The night was still and solemn, and every so often, Luella sent Nyx to check the height of the moon through the skylight in the main part of the library.

She still had time.

But with every passing moment, the hour for Luella to venture back to her room was growing closer and closer.

She sighed, fingers stilling on the spine of some nameless book. The leather was cracked and worn, and when she angeled it to check the front cover, she saw it was another senseless tome of spells and old proverbs. The nook was full of them. Luella wondered if she would ever find anything similar to the journal again. It must have been a fluke for her to happen upon the journal in the first place.

Every novel she and Nyx picked up and skimmed was some nonfiction collection of spells. No mention of a nameless *he* or the enigmatic Umbra…

"I’m done with this shelf," Luella mumbled as she walked on her knees to a small section of shelves at the furthest part of the nook. It was half hidden by the stone walls, and Luella wrinkled her nose at the sour scent of mold wafting from the slimy walls.

The cave entrance loomed in the furthest corner behind the shelf, and Luella felt she must keep an eye on it at all times. The pit of darkness made her fearful. What may crawl from its depths? Her body was angled toward where it lay, yet she was pressed far away, not willing to get any closer to it.

How could she venture into its depths if she could not even muster the courage to get closer?

Her knees were coated in pieces of algae and wet from where she had been kneeling on the ground for so long. She would have to find a way to discard the cloak before Ina or Osa saw it and mentioned the state of it to King Vale.

Nyx gave a soft and high hum under her breath in acknowledgment, flitting about the top shelves and checking them for Luella, who was much too short to reach.

"I’ll go check the moon again," said the sprite.

Luella nodded absentmindedly, attention stolen by the untouched corner of the library. Cobwebs stuck to the spines, connected to the corners of the wooden shelves. Little tangles of vines covered a large portion of the collection.

It was a litany of lost, fallen things.

Forgotten by time and taken by the elements.

Luella felt a strange sense of melancholy overtake her.

One day, would she be reduced to mere words on a dust-covered shelf?

Luella barely paid attention as Nyx flitted back into the alcove, perching atop her shoulder. The ends of her sparkling wings tickled Luella’s cheek, and she resisted the urge to bat them away.

But that wasn’t what made her pause.

No.

Luella’s focus was solely on a small brick jutting out from beside the shelf. It was wedged half behind the lowest portion of the bookcase, and the other half protruded from the stone wall. The stone was a mottled grey color, blending perfectly with the others. But something about it…

Her soul yearned. It reached. Clawed with desperate hands, begging Luella to *look*.

"Do you hear that?" Luella asked as she shook her head, trying to dispel the faint call ringing in her ears.

Nyx tugged on a golden strand of hair curling from behind Luella’s ear. "No."

"That stone…" Luella trailed off.

Her knees pressed into the rough floor, water dampening the fabric and chilling her skin. The sleeves of her cloak brushed against the stagnant pool of water, the little dripping noises as it plinked off the sleeves and fell back to the stone floor sounded far too loud, echoing in time with her heart.

Nyx said something, but Luella didn’t quite hear. Her brain was utterly consumed by the faint buzz that emanated from deep within her soul, calling out to whatever was tucked behind that stone.

Her head cocked, eyes falling upon the well of nothingness she knew to be carved into the stone wall behind the towering shelf. Was it coming from

there? Her ears strained while her heart kicked up into an anxious beat. What if someone was hiding there, lying in wait, ready to pounce?

But, no, she didn’t think so.

Her eyes drifted back to the stone that had caught her attention.

As a fae, Luella was raised to believe in higher powers and the gods, but never had she actually paid much heed to words of destiny. Not until that moment, with her magicless soul crying out and a sprite by her side, Luella felt like this exact moment in her life was written in the stars. Some unforgotten, celestial place of purples and flecks of blue and the shine of countless stars, far above in the sky.

Luella reached with shaking hands to unlodge the stone from the wall.

She tugged and tugged, jaw clenching as she tried to free it from where it was wedged. The stone bit into her palms, but with a single-minded focus, Luella ignored it. Until a jagged edge sliced into the skin of her palm.

Luella gave a short gasp of pain and pulled her hands back from the roughened stone, cradling them to her chest. A long, thin cut was sliced directly across her left palm. Even through the haze of whatever was clouding her mind, she felt the sting.

Hissing through her teeth, Luella inspected the wound. Red blood trailed in thin rivulets down the cut to her wrist, dotting the ends of her black cloak and turning it dark and wet.

"Lu!" Nyx exclaimed. "You’re hurt."

The tang of iron from her blood mingled with the musty air of the alcove, making Luella’s stomach roil with nausea.

"I’m alright," she replied. Her voice sounded thin and thready as if coming from a great distance.

Luella tugged down the sleeve of the cloak and held it tight to her palm, keeping any more blood from falling to the stone ground. The last thing she needed was a certain vampire to stumble into the library one day and smell her old blood from somewhere within. She wasn’t sure how, exactly, vampires scented blood, but Luella didn’t want to risk it. Not now.

Not when she was so close to *something*.

She bit her lip; the call thrummed in the air, a faint hum of adrenaline making her feel like she was standing at a precipe—overlooking a vast canyon, toes hanging over midair as the balls of her feet kept her firmly grounded, awaiting her to step off and leap into nothingness.

"Can you—" Her mouth was dry. "Can you help me?" she asked the sprite.

Luella didn’t wait to hear her reply. She went back to tugging on the stone with a renewed vigor, determined to free it.

Nyx lept off her perch on Luella’s shoulder. Small hands grasped a corner of the stone, and Nyx wedged her body behind a corner, wings fluttering as she used the motion to propel her forward to try and dislodge it.

The piece of stone came free with a clatter, nearly cutting into Luella’s hands again and crushing Nyx under its weight. It was almost the size of the sprite herself.

It fell against the floor, and she didn’t even glance at it. Luella’s attention was captivated by what lay tucked in a hollowed-out space in the wall.

A book.

It was small, a personal journal or diary of some sort.

Nyx’s tiny hands shot up to her mouth. "Wow."

Luella gave a soft hum in agreement, awe clouding her mind and making her limbs feel tingly.

Reverently, her fingers traced along the spine. A small spider scurried from the cover, disappearing further back into the hole, and her teeth dug into her lip to stop a startled yelp from breaking free. As she pulled the book away, cobwebs stuck to it, tangling with her hands. Dust motes floated in the air, caught in the candlelight of the chamberstick resting by her knees.

Luella’s focus was so stolen by the discovery she barely noted how the call within her had settled to an inconsequential pitter-patter, almost drowned out by her heart. If she hadn’t been so concentrated on it, she would’ve assumed it was the skittering of a cockroach across the floor.

Her hands smoothed over the cover as she rested the book atop her knees. It was a wonder it didn’t crumble under her touch. Luella didn’t think she had ever *felt* anything so aged. Not even in this deep part of the library, full of old tomes, as it were. It was a dichotomy. An ageless power radiated from the book, yet it appeared as if it had just been bound.

"How long has this been here?" Nyx asked, coming to settle on a shelf at eye-level with Luella.

Luella looked at the sprite, mouth slightly parted in her awe.

"I have no idea," she replied, words soft.

Luella looked down at the purple cover of the small journal; no title, no markings at all, an unadorned cover of leather. The pages were white and pristine, but the musty scent wafting from it spoke of its age. "But I feel I was destined to find this."

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THE PROPHECY

As Luella carefully opened the book, she couldn’t help but feel like her whole life had been leading to this very moment.

She held her breath.

The front cover fell open, revealing—

Nothing?

"What?" Luella mumbled.

Nyx’s tiny fingers dug into her shoulders as the sprite leaned down, peering at the opened book along with Luella.

Nyx made a sound of confusion. "It’s blank…"

It was, indeed, blank.

Luella flipped to the next page, only to see nothing at all. The next, then the next. With each page Luella turned, she saw the same thing. *Nothing*.

She shook her head, refusing to believe the strange call, that peculiar thrum she felt inside her, had all been for naught.

"It can’t be." Luella ran a hand over the blank pages. "This can’t be it."

As she flipped through the book, she was careful to keep the cut on her hand covered by her sleeve lest she get a drop of blood on it.

Not that it mattered now, apparently. This book was a farce.

Luella remembered the call inside her, a song playing from her soul that only she could hear. It had disappeared sometime between the space of one tremulous breath and the next, but she could still recall the all-consuming drive, the pull that tugged her right to that stone.

She eyed the empty pages.

But were they really empty?

"What if it’s enchanted?" The question fell from Luella’s lips like she was possessed.

It made sense. Didn’t it?

Nyx cocked her head, a leaf falling from her hair and sinking into a small puddle of water. "That could be possible." Her voice grew tinny with hesitancy, like she was afraid to feed into Luella’s sudden manic intensity.

"Think about it," Luella urged. "Why in the Above would an empty journal be tucked away so far into the library? And not only that but also hidden so that no one may ever be able to find it."

She flipped through the book, the individual white of the pages blurring together into one seamless ocean of untapped secrets.

It made a fresh wave of dust tickle against her senses, and Luella scrunched her nose. Distracted, she reached up with her injured hand and pressed her palm against her nose and mouth to allow herself a cover from the offending dust motes.

Her sleeve fell to her elbow, leaving the cut on her palm uncovered. She glanced down at it; blood still trailed over the lines of her palm. It hadn’t yet clotted. Maybe it was deeper than she had expected. Luella would have to bandage it when she returned to her room.

Speaking of…

She glanced back at the small entrance to the alcove. She would have to be getting back soon if she didn’t want to be discovered.

With a hand pressed against her lower face, she settled her attention back to the book resting on her lap. The front cover was innocuous and bare, and a title would have been there if it weren’t blank. She studied the white of the page like she was waiting for words to appear from thin air and jump out at her.

But with a soft slowness, her prayers were somehow answered.

A tiny drop of blood dripped from the cut on her palm, snaking down to her wrist before it left her skin entirely, falling in mid-air. It happened so fast, yet so slow. Luella saw everything in vivid detail, even if it couldn’t have been a few heartbeats of time.

The drop of her blood plinked against the page, crimson bleeding into the pristine, white page. It bloomed over the very center, tiny veins of red, webbed cracks radiating out from the droplet.

And then, words appeared.

Growing from the most faint of pearlescent whirls to a thick and dark scrawl. As if they had been there the entire time, just waiting for her.

Her heart froze in her chest before restarting with a languorous thud.

"Unbelievable." Luella’s hands fluttered over the book as if she were too afraid to touch it and disrupt the magic.

"Not quite," Nyx replied.

Luella agreed. Nothing was ever truly unfathomable.

The very first page of the book read a title, the word making something ancient settle in the air.

"*Compendium of Fates*," Luella read.

"The Fates?" Nyx covered her mouth with two small hands, wings fluttering behind her in shock. "I thought they disappeared."

To even hear the word *Fates*…

A word that had haunted her childhood in little warnings and sayings uttered to a young, tucked-away heirus in hopes she would be a dutiful, obedient pet. *Don’t tempt the Fates; don’t go against the will of the Fates*, her parents and tutors would warn.

Though, they all knew the Fates were long gone. Only leaving them with strange tales of beings who would freely give futures away like mere words of greeting.

"What do the Fates have to do with this?" Luella skimmed a finger over the book.

Over time, the Fates had become something of an old legend. A myth to those who did not truly believe—but like all things, even myths had truth to them. They had to have originated from somewhere, of course.

And the legend of the Fates was as old as any.

They were said to have walked among all creatures once, imparting freely those with their futures and fates woven from webs of immutable destiny.

"What does the rest say?" Nyx implored.

Luella silently turned the page, a slight shake to her hands. She tried to quell the nerves welling within her, but it was no use. It was all too overwhelming and unexpected.

The next page had neither a title nor an author. Only a few lines, written in stanzas of poetry, simple and perplexing, complex and strange—it was everything and nothing, mysterious and beautiful.

Luella read strange words of lush forests and swirling winds, roaring fires and depthless oceans. She swore she could feel the brush of green grass under her fingertips, the breeze of a summer’s evening playing in the tendrils of her hair, a fire warming her fingers after a day in the cold, waves lapping against her feet with ocean foam curling along the hem of her gown.

All the while, the sun and moon stood in the sky above, watching.

It was extraordinary.

When she finished the first page, the silence hung between her and the sprite.

Nyx swallowed harshly, a look of pure yearning on her face. "That was —" She shook her head, stolen of words.

"It was." Luella’s voice was soft and awestruck.

Nyx’s wing rustled as she left her perch atop Luella’s shoulder. She hovered in midair, fingers curling against her empty palm as if she, too, sought to feel vines tangling in her grip or reach for the warmth of a crackling flame.

The sprite bit her lip. "Read the next one."

Luella was already turning the page, smoothing a palm over the soft paper as she flipped it, but the rising hope and curiosity inside of her was crushed when she saw another blank page.

"Again?" Nyx huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

Luella echoed the disgruntled noise. "Why? Why could we see the first page but not this one?"

Did she have to drop more of her blood?

She turned to the next page, but still, nothing.

She knew her time here was running out. She was already pushing her luck.

Glancing over her shoulder, her eyes peered into the darkness of the shelves, searching for any hint of dawn light that would break apart her hushed discoveries. It was still dark, thankfully. But Luella knew it wouldn’t be for long. Not nearly long enough for her to uncover the secrets hidden before her.

In a last bid for some answers, she flipped through the pages hurriedly, seeing nothing but pure, untouched white. The edges blurred together. But a spark of black ink caught her eye. With a gasp, Luella halted, the corners of the crisp paper cutting into her thumb as she stopped at the last few pages.

"Please, please," she mumbled, trying not to feed into the hope swelling in her chest.

"What?" Nyx practically threw herself back onto Luella’s shoulder and leaned forward as if to say, *on with it!*

"There’s more."

Luella brought the book closer to her face, and she and Nyx leaned in together.

The words were small, barely a few lines, but it felt as powerful as a tome of spells.

"*To expel the dark, the shadow’s spark, and defeat the stolen, she must bond with the chosen*." The words rang as they filled the quiet spaces of the alcove, sinking deep into the entryway of the tunnel, forever lost, never to be found.

Except by her—and Nyx.

"Read more," the sprite urged.

And Luella did.

"*A child born in the dark, with hair white stark. Eyes of moonlit blue, an enchanting hue. Bound to thee of might, who wickedly plight. Fated to be—*"

The words cut off there. The end of the page was torn roughly, as if the one who did it, however long ago, was in a hurry.

Luella traced the jagged edges of the page and mused, "Who is this child?"

"I don’t know," Nyx breathed. "But whoever she is, she sounds important…"

She met Nyx’s verdant eyes, the green reminiscent of the grass she saw in her mind when she read the first poem.

They stared at each other, robbed of thought, as the words lingered in the air like a promise. Or a threat.

Just when Luella’s mouth opened to speak—and say what, she would never know—the sound of voices broke up their haze of reverie.

Her eyes widened.

King Vale was here.

Voices echoed in the darkness of the library, bouncing off the high walls and ringing throughout, reaching all the way to where Nyx and Luella were huddling in the deep of the alcove.

Footsteps thumped on the floors, and even as far back as she and Nyx were tucked away, Luella felt her heart as it froze into a solid chunk of ice. Her body grew utterly still as she waited.

"What the fuck are you playing at?" Hissed between what she imagined were the King’s clenched teeth.

The words were clear, even as they were said from the front of the library, passing through all the hidden towers and alcoves and filtering in through the tiny spaces of stacked books and shelves.

Quick as lightning, Luella blew the flame of the candle out, leaving her and the sprite in a blanket of darkness. Stolen of sight, she squinted as she tried to adjust to the dark. Her hearing grew sharper in the absence of one of her senses, but it still wasn’t enough.

She cursed her fae hearing. If only she were a shifter, she would have heard the words and footsteps before they ever even came to the library. Would have been alerted and able to flee in time. But now she was stuck here. Until King Vale left.

She didn’t want to know what he would do to her if he found out she wasn’t in her room.

A shiver wracked her frame as she remembered the congealed pools of blood on the gallows. The thwack of a sharp blade against a neck. The thump of a head as it hit the ground and rolled away, the lifeless, headless bodies slumping to the side.

Her palms grew clammy, and she wiped them on her thighs, a slight tremble to her shoulders.

Luella could almost feel the heat of his tempestuous dragon flame rising to the surface of his skin, a scorching aura. Invisible smoke searched for her in the darkness and tickled against her fingertips.

She didn’t envy whoever was on the receiving end of such scathing words.

"Don’t start with that self-righteous drivel, Vale." The voice that replied was none other than Bastian’s sensual, silken tone.

The faint shuffle of feet made her picture the vampire pacing back and forth, a hand braced against his chin as he thought. Luella could almost see the red flash in his eyes.

A scoff. "Please, the only self-righteous one here isn’t even in this room."

What did the King mean by that?

"No," Bastian replied. "He’s currently rotting in the dungeons. All because your ego is too inflated to see your wrongs. When a challenge against your word actually had merit, you decided the best course of action was to throw him into the dungeons."

A loud clatter made her jolt. Nyx’s hands dug into Luella’s shoulders so hard she winced.

For such a tiny thing, the sprite was awfully strong.

"Don’t ever question me or my word again, Advisor. Or this night will be your last above ground."

Bastian laughed, but it sounded strained. Forced. "Like you would? Try it. Go ahead, Vale. Kill me."

"Don’t think I don’t dream about it. If anyone would know that, it would be *you*." King Vale hissed the last word.

The vampire was a thief of the mind. And if anyone knew of the mind’s innermost musings or desires, it would be one with Mind magic.

She knew of Bastian’s icy touch, his way of stealing into her dreams and making himself home there—as if he always belonged.

"As much as I enjoy this heartwarming display of bonding." She heard Tharen’s icy tone as he interjected, "We all know killing won’t happen."

"Can’t, you mean," Graves grumbled.

Luella was surprised to hear the shadowed raven shifter speak. Her lips tingled in memory of his pressing against hers in this very library.

But her brows rose. Were all four of the males here?

"Hey, I’m the first to say killing is the answer, but it’s not like we’re able to fucking harm each other. Not for lack of trying." Tharen’s voice grew bitter at the end, and she was overwhelmed by how much information one could glean by merely sitting in the shadows and observing.

She realized why Graves enjoyed it so much.

Was the mage insinuating that they couldn’t hurt each other?

Why? *How*?

Luella recalled all the times she had seen the males interact. The would-be acts of violence, curbed by what she thought was a level mind, but now realized it was anything but. They were physically unable to harm each other.

Was Az included?

No, he couldn’t be, she thought. He didn’t seem to be a part of the close-knit inner circle that surrounded the King. Her demon was in the dungeons, chained and bordering on underfed. Even as a passive way of harm, it was still harm.

Right?

She tucked the information away. What she would do with it, Luella was unsure, but it must be useful for something.

Luella heard a loud bang as if clenched fists were thrown atop a table. "You seem to be forgetting something. It’s not just our destiny, but *hers*." The sudden shift in topic from the King made her mind swim as she tried to catch up.

Luella knew, even without hearing her name, that they were talking about her.

"Every day, what the Fates foretold is growing closer. And every day, I fear we won’t survive it. That maybe they were wrong. Maybe we can’t"—King Vale cleared his throat—"do this."

In the darkness, Luella and Nyx shared a look, the whites of the sprite’s eyes gleaming. She imagined the same expression she wore of confusion and fear was playing on Nyx’s features.

How uncanny for her to overhear the King speak of the Fates right after she had stumbled upon a supposed compendium written by them.

Maybe the creatures weren’t gone after all, she inwardly mused. Her fingers traced over the cracks in the stone, imagining the little lines to be like webs of fate, splintering in a million different directions, all stemming from tiny, singular acts.

"We will. We have to," Graves swore.

She heard quiet mumblings uttered between the males, and she imagined the raven shifter bending his head to the King’s ear.

"He cannot win," Bastian harshly uttered. "The Umbra threatens to overtake us, but we have the Fates on our side."

"Just as you forget your place, you forget that we are not the only ones with the Fates on our side. The Tenebrae received a prophecy, just as we did."

Tenebrae…

That name… The cadence sounded the same as *Umbra*. A soft lilt in the last syllable. A rolling ending note.

Similar but different. Different but similar.

Where had she heard it before?

As if Bastian could hear her thoughts—*could he?*—he spoke. "Tenebrae *is* darkness. But the Umbra are only partly so. Shadows. Created with light… At least we can fight them easier than we can the Tenebrae. You forget he is not invincible. No one truly is."

Darkness and shadows.

The line from *Compendium of Fates* was staring up at her from the opened book on her lap. Her eyes stared to make out the inked scrawl.

Expel the dark, the shadow's spark.

"We do not have a chance. Not if..." The King's words grew mumbled; she couldn't hear the rest of what he said. The not knowing would haunt her.

Tharen interjected, "We do have a chance. A slim one. But a chance, all the same."

"We can only survive on hopes and dreams of prophecies for so long." Grave's tone was solemn. "One day, we might find out it was all for nothing. Broken friendships, stolen futures. Deaths. Countless lives lost. All on our shoulders. The promise of her—" His words cut off in a choked stagger. As if he couldn't bear to continue.

The room grew silent, and Luella shifted, legs growing tingly with numbness from her seated position.

Nyx pointed to the tiny space leading to the main portion of the library, then back to Luella, before making a crossing gesture with her forearms, warning her not to leave yet.

The sprite tugged on the ends of Luella's curls before silently hopping from her shoulder. She hovered in midair, and the faintest hint of light illuminated the iridescence of her wings, giving her a halo of green shimmers. With a tiny finger wave, the sprite left, disappearing without a trace between the cracks of two leaning books.

Luella was left alone in the musty alcove. Even with the silence, she knew they hadn't left yet.

She would wait. For as long as it took.

Shifting to sit with her knees bent before her, arms hugging them to her chest, Luella's head thumped back on the stone wall. She was careful to keep the book close to her, even though she silently resented what it meant.

Change.

She never had done too well with change.

"I need her." Hushed words uttered with reverence, breaking up the silence as they fell from the lips of one she had never expected to say such a thing. Tharen sighed after speaking as if the weight of all the kingdoms were resting upon him. And maybe they were.

"She’s… more," Bastian revealed. "The pull is so much more than I had been anticipating."

"I didn’t realize how much I would be drawn to her. I thought it would be easy, being in her presence. But it’s been so hard." A faint tapping noise; she imagined the King’s long fingers drumming on an oak tabletop as he spoke.

Tharen barked a laugh, but with the lingering remnants of his soft admission weighing on her heart, it sounded like a way to protect himself instead of the cruel, unfeeling sound she had once thought it. "Is the stubborn dragon admitting to having a crush on his captive?"

They were talking about *her*?

"Save it, Prima. We both know you would have had her in your bed by now if I hadn’t forbade it," King Vale asserted.

Her cheeks warmed. She was suddenly glad Nyx had left. Luella didn’t want the sprite to ask why she was blushing over words that shouldn’t have meant anything to her.

"Lust and love are two different things. I don’t do *crushes*," the mage sneered. "I can ignore that godsdamned pull leading me to protect her—and more—while still feeling lust toward her. Don’t deny it. You do, too." A heavy pause. "All of you do."

The air grew terse. Luella could feel it even as far away from them as she was.

Graves was the one to break the silence. "Not quite."

He did not elaborate. And she was left to wonder what he meant. Did he not quite feel something for her, or was he not quite able to deny this so-called pull?

She wrapped her arms around her thighs tighter, chin resting on her knees as she tried to stop the pounding of her heart. She could feel the phantom tingle of Graves’s bare hand against her cheek, his lips caressing her heated skin, her neck. His glove was tucked under her mattress, and her face burned at the thought of him ever discovering she had kept it.

"When I do have her in my bed, I doubt she'd even know what to do," Tharen taunted. The way he said *when* and not *if* made her lower belly feel strange. "The little lamb may very well die of a heart attack before her clothes even come off."

Another clatter. This one, louder. Her hands shot to cover her mouth and stifle a gasp as she heard the unmistakable thump of a fist against a face.

She had heard that sound countless times before—her father striking her mother or a servant. Or sometimes, even Luella herself.

That's why, when Tharen laughed—*actually laughed*—she gave pause.

The mage was truly insane, and she shuddered to think of the look on his face. Those cold blue eyes, narrowing in ire, teeming with violence.

"Don't fucking disrespect her, you bastard," she heard Graves threaten. His gruff voice was like the sharpened steel of a dagger, cutting and lethal.

Her mouth dropped open, and she pressed her hands harder over her lower face to stifle the pleased sound that threatened to bubble up.

Graves was defending her. The same one who disregarded her privacy and watched her undress… She should feel anything but affection for the male but couldn't help the swell of fondness that rose in her chest.

The silence was anything but quiet. It was loud. Heavy.

And broken by the mage's hushed reply, "The only bastard here is you."

"You fucking—"

"*Enough*!" King Vale boomed.

Luella was taken back to when she first met him. The way he ordered her to kneel. The way he quelled the anger of the courtiers.

The command and tone of the King he was.

"Don't act so scandalized," Tharen muttered. He paused, and she imagined the utter look of arrogance that must be playing on his face. "You're not fooling anyone with your quiet act. You're as sick as the rest of us."

Bastian coughed, then mumbled, "It's always the quiet ones."

She barely caught it with how low the vampire had said it. She didn't know what that meant… *Always the quiet ones?*

Graves's reply was hushed and angered. "I may be sick, but at least I have the decency to hide it."

"No, not the decency," Tharen said. Even without seeing his face, Luella knew his lips would be turned up at the corners in a vicious, mocking grin.

"The shame. When you get your hands on her, you'll ruin her. Just like the rest of us. Don't think you're impervious to temptation."

The last sentence was uttered with a resigned tone, as if the mage was robbed of choice. Unable to stop what was coming, just as Luella was.

"I said, enough of this! Back to the topic at hand." The King's order was as subdued as the mage's lingering promise. "Advisor, what's the status in Medius?"

With the use of Bastian's formal title, all taunting was gone, the energy between them growing heavy with formalities.

"The Umbra is still a heavy presence in the outermost villages. We've lost many, and they're spreading. I've received reports that a small, unnamed village fell after a babe grew ill. But not an illness of the body, one of the mind. A villager who escaped spoke of possession." Bastian scoffed. "The babe scratched his mother, and it was over before it even began. The whole town was taken within hours."

What in the Above were they speaking about? Luella struggled to follow the conversation.

A mere babe, blamed for the destruction of an entire village? It couldn't be possible. They must be mistaken.

King Vale let out a growl of discontent. "And they're still moving inward to the major cities?"

Bastian hummed an affirmative. It was so low Luella had to strain to hear it.

"They're being herded," Tharen said.

"And will soon overtake all of Medius and turn the bulk of their attentions here," said Graves. "We must act."

"We are," King Vale seethed.

Just as Bastian hissed, "In time."

It seemed like they liked that expression. *In time.* She had heard both Graves and Bastian tell her the very same thing to placate her and her questions.

Could it be possible? Could King Vale have something to do with the prophecy and this darkness and shadow?

If so, Luella had to escape. And soon.

She couldn't risk being here any longer. Alone, she worried she would never be able to flee Serpentis, but with Az's help, they could do it. They could get out of here.

From where she was sitting, angled near the shelf, she eyed the tiny tunnel that led gods knew where. The hole was larger than she was but still small. Would Az even be able to fit? His shoulders were broad, and he dwarfed her frame; the demon was large.

But it was their only option, not if they wanted to risk alerting the King or being spotted by his guards. She doubted they could escape even under the cover of night. Inside the castle, the patrols were practically nonexistent during nightfall, but she had peered out her window. She knew that guards were stationed all around the castle grounds, no matter the time of day.

The tunnels were their best bet. But perhaps not the safest.

She skimmed her fingertips over a standing pool of water. It had to have come from somewhere—just as the faint scent of salt misted the air before her, the tunnel must have an opening.

Their talking turned to more war strategies and accounts of dwindling resources accrued from Medius—leathers from the cows, bountiful minerals from ore mining in the mountains, and food from crops. It sounded as though Serpentis was taking a hit from the unrest in Medius.

It was all over her head, even with the years of political tutoring she had received. It made Luella wonder if her tutors didn't sabotage her with unnecessary teachings.

Or purposefully feed you lies, a small part of her mind hissed.

King Vale inquired about some of the human towns in Medius. Bastian spoke of docile villagers turning weapons against friends and family.

And Tharen occasionally butted in with a strange emphasis on the villagers showing behaviors of biting and scratching.

As they conversed, Luella kept circling back to why.

Why would anyone dare a mutiny against the King?

Why was there so much dissension in the villages?

Why did they speak of Luella as if they had been waiting for her their whole lives? As if they already knew her long before they laid eyes on her, as if she were someone important.

Her thoughts swirled.

All while an even tinier corner of her soul echoed: why did she find an odd sense of peace in that?

And the worst thought of all, an almost irrefutable truth resounding within her mind—was the King and his court in league with these so-called shadowed creatures, the Umbra?

It didn’t sound like it.

Her heart sped up. Bastian had said the Umbra was only part darkness. Able to be fought. But if it was responsible for these deaths, the blight of darkness and destruction taking over the outer villages of Medius, then what was the Tenebrae?

Luella’s eyes grew heavier the longer she sat there stewing in fearful suspicions. Their voices washed over her, turning into one long, rumbling drone of strategy and trade talks.

She just wanted to sleep and deal with everything she had learned in the morning when she had a clear head.

No matter what she had discovered here, the only thing that hadn’t changed was her resolve.

She would escape.

And Az was coming with her.

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ENCOUNTER WITH A PSYCHOPATH

Luella's eyes shot open.

Disorientation rocked her bones, and she took a moment to get her bearings, tired eyes squinting in the darkness.

When she remembered where she was, Luella's legs scrambled against the stone as she stretched her numb legs out in front of her.

She fumbled in the dark for the chamberstick, her hand hitting the stone before she touched the cool metal. Gripping the bottom, she stood slowly and quietly, with a hand pressed to her mouth to hold back the sound of her breathing.

Her ears strained, but all she heard was the steady drip of water as it cascaded into the pools, the slight ripple as it hit the surface, and the faintest sound of the wind howling in the night.

Luella poked her head from between two cracks in the shelves. It was still and dark in the small maze leading to her hidden alcove. Dare she risk leaving?

She weighed the *Compendium of Fates* in her hand.

It would be better to leave it. She didn't want anyone to find it. Especially if she happened to be discovered.

Decision made, Luella walked to the wall where she had found the book and knelt on the ground. In the thick blanket of darkness, it was hard to find the exact stone it had been wedged behind, so she skimmed her hands along

the lower parts of the wall, fingers searching along dips and grooves in the damp stone before she found a hollow.

The back of her neck prickled as her attention was turned away from the shelf that hid the tunnel entrance. In a sudden rush of fear, her head whipped to the side, sure she would find shadowed figures looming behind her, but there was nothing, as far as she could tell in the dark—that thought was not comforting.

Placing the book back inside the hole, Luella stood. She didn't even bother trying to find the stone that had covered it. It had been flung somewhere after she and Nyx had unwedged it. No telling where it had found a resting place. The cover and tangle of the maze of shelves would have to be enough to keep it tucked away.

She brushed dust away from her knees and tiptoed back the way she had come. Unlit chamberstick in one hand, Luella wrapped her cloak around her tighter to ward off the sudden chill seeping through the darkness. The air grew tangy with mist and the scent of rain, and she tried to ignore how dark it was—how the entryway to the caves was right here in this alcove, and she was utterly alone.

Goosebumps skittered along the exposed parts of her skin, and Luella hurried to leave, shoulders curving inward as she made herself smaller to fit between the two shelves.

A long breath fell from her lips, sounding way too loud in the hushed maze.

She was free. Almost.

Luella would just have to make it back through the halls of shelves and then to her room. All without being discovered.

She bit her lip.

Should be easy… Right?

So long as she didn't run into King Vale or the others.

Quiet as a whisper, she balanced on her tiptoes, thankful she had decided to go without slippers. She was used to being barefoot, could control her steps, and easily silence her footfalls.

Luella was reminded of her play-pretend adventures, walking through ruins or the gardens around the castle in Solis and pretending to be a spy sent to kill some unnamed enemy. With a renewed vigor, her steps become less hesitant, her posture more lithe.

It was a dance she had done many times before. But now, the stakes were higher. Deadly.

Just as she rounded the last collection of shelves that would open to the main area of the library, Luella pressed her back flush to the wall, her chest rising and falling quickly with adrenaline.

She peered around the corner, thankfully, the moonlight filtering through the dome of glass offered plenty of light for her to see by.

It was empty.

Her shoulders slumped in relief.

Thank the gods.

With the chamberstick clutched to her chest, Luella left the safety of her hidden position and scampered across the open expanse of the room.

Without thinking and waiting any longer, she opened the door to the library and left, shutting it behind her with a faint click.

Her back rested against the closed door, head thumping against the wood and eyes closing, only for a moment, as she collected her wits and prepared for the trek back to her room.

A rush of warmth passed in front of her, and Luella grew rigid as her eyes opened.

Broad shoulders, a towering frame, and white hair that stood out starkly in the dark halls.

A quiet scream flowed past her lips, cutting off into a strangled gasp when the male advanced on her.

Luella’s back pressed further against the door to the library, and she shrunk against it as Tharen crowded into her space, coming closer and closer with a strong gate.

Before she could blink, he was upon her.

The mage pinned her to the door, hands braced on either side of her head. She cowered back, eyes squeezing shut.

A hand brushed along her cheek, and she flinched back. Tharen flipped her hood away from her face, palm settling against the base of her neck, while his other hand kept her pinned to the wall, a clenched fist lodged against the door above her head, keeping both of her hands in his grip.

"Look at me," whispered against her skin.

Luella opened her eyes.

Tharen’s icy gaze settled on hers, and somehow, the hold of his stare did more to entrap her than the weight of his body.

He searched her face, hand tightening imperceptibly against the base of her throat.

"Little lamb, little lamb, aren’t you far from your cage?" Tharen taunted with an unyielding edge to his voice.

Think, think, think, she urged herself…

This was bad. Very bad.

And had the very real possibility to become worse if she was not careful.

"I-I wanted… I wanted to read," she managed to say under the intense focus of his attention.

Tharen arched a brow. "Read?"

It was obvious he did not believe her.

He looked at her like a hunter with sights locked on prey. They were all alone in this hall. It was night. No one would come for her.

Luella trembled like a leaf, her captured hands flexing, testing the strength of his hold. His jaw pulsed, and he pulled up on her arms, making her gasp and rise to her tiptoes to relieve the strain on her arm sockets.

In memory of her dislocated shoulder, her captured limbs twinged, and she winced.

"Y-yes." Luella gulped. "I finished my book and wanted to… to find another."

She couldn’t stop trembling.

"And did you?" Tharen moved the hand against her neck up to her cheek, a finger trailing across her jaw. His head lowered, nose pressing into her neck. She shivered from his breath warming her sensitive skin. With a deep rumble, Tharen pulled back, eyes narrowing. "Find another, that is?"

Luella wished she had thought to pick up some innocuous book to use as a cover, but she was left unprepared for the mage’s line of questioning. She would only dig herself a deeper grave if she didn’t infuse a modicum of truth. Somewhat, at least.

Luella was honest. "No."

She never was a good liar. Better to spin the truth into something that would best serve her than give blatant lies and be caught with no way out.

Tharen hummed, regarding her curiously. "Is that all you have to say?"

She nodded.

The hand that held her wrists loosened, and he brought them down in front of them, held between their chests. Tharen laced his fingers between

hers, locking them together in what should have been a friendly touch. Though it was anything but. From the mere act of his hand twining with hers, the mage had staked a claim unable to be shaken.

Another thing stolen from her that she should have freely given, holding hands and fleeing down moonlit halls to steal kisses from a lover in a nightly tryst.

Instead, the scene before her was a machiavellian mockery of the romance she had spun in her head. The moonlight was obscured by his broad shoulders, leaving her in a cast of shadows. The door dug into her back, and his hands burned against the bare skin of her wrists, leaving bruises from the force with which he gripped her.

It was anything but romantic. And the mage was anything but a male she desired romance with. He was too crazed, too cunning.

A cunning she knew saw right through her niceties.

That's why Luella forced herself to turn away from her real self—the careful creature spinning words of stuttering cowardice…

With a shaky breath, she splayed the palm that had been cut on the stone against his chest, hiding it. Just so he wouldn't notice the dried blood and ask how it was acquired.

Tharen was warm and hard, with a strength that made her knees go weak. His scent was enticing, a perfectly curated blend just for her. Ice chips melting on her tongue, the crisp, new beginning of winter, and the stark taste of freedom from the turn of seasons.

Luella wanted it. The allure, the promise. So close she could feel it brush against her fingertips.

And maybe, just maybe, she was intrigued by him. He was similar to his scent, after all. Bitterly cold and frost-bitten, with a twinge of something new underneath. Unstoppable blizzards and unique snowflakes.

From the stories she had heard the servants at her home whisper, all males grew pliant from a willing woman. And even the unwilling. Luella decided to test those hushed mumblings, stories told as her maids tended to her, thinking her an unimportant heirus. But she listened. She always did.

The sound of her breathing was loud to her own ears as she dragged her hand up to toy with the edge of his collar. The top buttons were undone, leaving a large portion of his chest bare. The tip of her pinky skimmed along his bare chest, and he groaned at her touch.

It made her feel powerful.

And in over her head.

Luella couldn’t quite meet his eyes, even as her hand continued its hesitant venture over his chest. The tiniest smear of scarlet was left on his cotton shirt, so faint, she hoped that he would miss it.

He was constantly covered in blood and dirt, as Luella had seen. What’s a little more?

All too soon, her fleeting control over their run-in was wrested as the mage took the power back from her. Tharen easily commandeered her, looming above her with a punishing grip encircling her wrists and knees lodged on either side of her thighs. She was pinned immobile against the door. Against him.

"What are you doing?" Tharen gritted out between his teeth as he stared down at her.

"I…"

He poked his tongue in his cheek, lip curving up into the beginnings of a snarl.

Maybe that hadn’t been wise.

"Answer me when I ask you a question, Princess," he ordered. "Do not make me repeat myself. *What are you doing*?"

What’s another tiny truth on a mountain of lies?

"Your scent," she managed. "It calls to me."

She still could not look him in the eye.

Tharen fit his finger under her chin and forced her head up to meet his gaze.

He looked perturbed by her admittance, shy as it had been.

"Do not ever repeat those words again," he ordered. "Not if you value your life."

"What life? You mean the one I currently am a prisoner to?" Luella raised her chin indignantly, forcing his finger to fall away from her face.

Tharen growled and pulled away from her. "Go back to your cage, lamb," he all but snarled. "And make no mistake, it is a cage. Even though you’re free to roam the palace now, these halls are no different from the iron bars of the dungeon. Just prettier. All the better to distract you with."

The mage reminded Luella of a villain from a fairy tale. But if this was a fanciful fairy tale, where was her savior? Luella would have no knight to swoop in and rescue her—she had given up hope for that long ago in the

dungeons. Not even Az could save her; the demon was no valiant, good-natured being, either.

She was alone.

Alone in a den of wicked and duplicitous creatures.

With that sense of being forsaken came a strength she didn’t know the origins of. Perhaps it was because she knew subconsciously that only she could save herself.

That’s why, when Luella placed both hands on Tharen’s chest and *shoved*, she did so with delight and force she didn’t know she was capable of.

He barely stumbled back; she was no match for him, but it was the meaning behind the action that counted.

"You’ll never break me," she hissed.

Tharen grew still and looked at her with a heated charge crackling between them like embers. He opened his mouth like he might wish to say something but closed it and shook his head.

"Go." Tharen pointed down the hall.

Luella didn’t hesitate.

Surely, she thought the mage would have punished her for her words, for fighting back. She wouldn’t look at the reasoning behind his curt dismissal for fear of what she may find.

Luella fled down the hall. A fast walk, almost a run, but not quite. She didn’t want to give Tharen the satisfaction that he unnerved her enough to force her to tuck tail and run.

Stalking her as a large, imposing force, Tharen followed, herding her back to her room—her cage.

The darkened halls passed by in a blur. Luella had one thought spinning in her mind and no room for anything else.

Must get away.

Tharen was unpredictable, and that unpredictability was terrifying.

He was silent behind her, always a few paces away. Close enough, she could almost feel him breathing down her neck, but far enough away, she was granted a false sense of autonomy—like it was her decision to leave. But they both knew it wasn’t. She was being herded like the obedient, mindless lamb he likened her to.

Luella didn’t stop until she saw the door leading to her room. A breath of relief wooshed from her lungs at the sight. The light oak door was a

saving grave in a vast expanse of darkness.

She turned her head.

Tharen stood at the end of the hall behind her, back straight and feet apart, like he was readying himself to pounce.

With a wicked grin that Luella was learning donned his features more often than not, the mage slowly raised a hand. His fingers fluttered as he gave a mocking wave.

Her heart caught in her chest, and without further preamble, Luella jerked open her door and shut herself inside. The many unlit candles on the small dresser rattled from the force of the door slamming.

There was no lock. Not on the inside, at least.

She didn't think she would sleep a wink, not with that… that *beast* prowling the halls.

In a fit of desperate urgency, Luella dragged the tiny stool in front of the vanity over and wedged the back of it under the handle.

There.

Hopefully, that would help.

But who was she fooling?

Luella sighed.

Certainly not herself. And most definitely not Tharen.

That flimsy stool would offer nothing but a warning. The mage could snap the wooden legs of it with one hand if he so wished.

Luella scoffed at the sorry attempt at safety, but it would have to do for now.

Taking off her cloak, she draped it over the vanity and padded to the balcony doors. She peered out into the moonlit dark of the night. Stars flecked the vast array of the sky, but their glow was broken by the faintest traces of dawn cresting the horizon.

Dawn, the bringer of new beginnings. And perhaps the harbinger of her demise.

For Tharen knew where she had been under cover of darkness, and Luella was certain he would share it with the King.

Her hands shook as she pulled back the silken sheets of her bed and crawled under the covers. Would this be her last time sleeping in such luxury?

At least in the cold, damp dungeons, she would have Az.

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PART III

LIES

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38

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Wild and warm dreams melted against Luella’s mind.

She felt the plushness of a familiar fur rug under her feet; the feel of everything vivid and faint, all at once.

Fire crackled, and she let her head roll back against a cozy chair.

She knew that she was dreaming. What a funny feeling that was, to be aware that the reality you currently saw was one conjured by your mind—or someone else’s.

Nothing but a sense of warm and fuzzy relaxation soothed her tense limbs, turning her into a puddle of pure mush as she languidly stretched out her toes on the rug.

"Comfy?" a deep voice crooned near her.

Luella gasped, legs pulling up to her chest as she wrapped her arms around them.

"Bastian!" Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the vampire in front of her.

He sat on the low table before her, his elbows resting on his knees as he regarded her with a warmth that burned hotter than the heat from the flames.

"I do so love the sound of my name on your lips." Bastian moved his hand to skim his fingers up along her thighs. Thighs that were bare, she was just now noticing. She tugged on the hem of her nightgown, a blush warming her face. "Say it again," he murmured.

Luella rested her hands on her knees, knocking off Bastian’s wandering touch as she said with a glare, "You shouldn’t have told me you like that. Now, you’ll never hear it from my lips again."

She was emboldened by this sphere of dreams, untouched by reality. Luella felt like she could say anything, do anything.

He grinned at her. "I love it when you talk back."

Luella stood from the chair. Her head was slightly above his from where he was seated on the low table. She felt a thrill at the imbalance of their height, like maybe she had power over *him* and not the other way around.

Bastian rested his hands on her hips, and the touch seared her skin through the thin material of her nightgown. She swallowed, pulling away from him a bit, but his hands followed hers, growing firm on her as he pulled her back to him. Bastian parted his thighs and tugged Luella to stand between them. He looked up at her, chin brushing against her stomach. The red tinge in his irises looked all the more sinister in the low lighting of this dim-lit dreamscape.

"You’re such a curious little creature," he purred. His hands spanned over her waist, and his thumbs rubbed absentminded circles over her hipbones.

Luella rested her hands on his shoulders. For a vampire, he was as warm as the sun. Maybe it was just in dreams he held such an inviting warmth; Luella knew he was cold as stone in reality.

She was silent as she smoothed her hands down to his biceps, a ghost of a touch. Her eyes traced over the swirling, delicate lines of black ink peaking out from the collar of his shirt. His tattoos were so different from the ones Tharen had. Where the mage’s ink was thick, blocky, and dark, the swirls of tattoos on Bastian’s pale skin were soft and graceful. Luella saw a faint etching of rosy red lines on his chest, swirling out from a thicker web of dark ink.

A tight grip on her wrist stopped her hands from traveling further down. Bastian pulled her hand to his mouth and pressed a featherlight kiss against her palm. Her breath hitched.

"Can you blame me for my curiosity?"

Bastian looked at Luella with half-lidded eyes. "No." He hummed. "But that doesn’t stop your curiosity from being vexing."

She tugged her hand away and held it to her chest. Thankfully, it was her uninjured palm. She didn’t want to think about what the vampire would

do if he saw the cut on her other hand—still there, even in dreams. She hadn’t cleaned or dressed it before bed; dried blood still flecked the lines of it.

Bastian continued to run his hand along the side of her waist, saying, "I do not blame you, pet. Never let that curiosity go. Even if it takes you places that little princesses shouldn’t be in the night." His words made all the blood leach from her face. She lowered her gaze, and Bastian reached up and tweaked the tip of her arched ear. "And even if it lets you hear things that you do not understand…"

He knew. It was undeniable.

Slowly, he took her other hand and brought it to his nose.

And hope left her entirely.

Luella let him take her injured palm in his hands and tried to stamp down the muted sense of anxiety that bubbled up as he brought her palm to his face.

"Always getting hurt and bleeding," he mumbled under his breath. "This is my blood."

He spoke of her life force like it was owed to him. Like it ran through her veins at his whim.

"Not yours," she said. But it was a half-hearted utterance, no bite to it.

Bastian looked up at her and held unwavering eye contact as his nose skimmed the length of the cut. He breathed deep, a groan rising from within the depths of his chest.

"The scent of you should be unlawful."

She waited for the true fear to kick in—with a predator after the scent of her blood—but it never did.

Not even when Bastian’s tongue flicked out and traced the line of the cut.

Luella felt only a strange desire thrumming low in her belly. Her bare toes curled in the soft rug under her feet, and her mouth parted, the sound of her breathing loud, a backdrop to the crackling flames in the fireplace.

All too soon, the spell was broken.

Bastian’s eyes shuttered, and his hands went back to her hips, pulling her flush to him. He rested his forehead on her stomach. The action was intimate. Even after he had tasted her blood—the very thing that made her heart beat—she felt overcome by how vulnerable the vampire was being.

Hesitantly, she threaded her fingers through his hair, and he let out a soft breath from her touch.

"Are you… Are you going to send me back to the dungeons?" she asked softly, fingers curling in his silky hair. She felt tears burn the backs of her eyes but refused to let them fall.

Bastian pulled away from her, looking deep into her eyes as he gripped her cheeks. Luella tried not to lean into the touch.

"No," he swore.

At the vehemence in his tone, Luella studied him. She saw no tricks there, only a splayed open truth. A promise.

She nodded, the action causing his smooth palm to rub against her cheek. "Thank you," she said, then cleared her throat. "Does the King know?"

Bastian’s attention was on his fingers as they brushed over her soft cheekbone. He watched her like he was watching the beauty of a sunrise—awed by a glowed brilliance, grateful just to be kissed by the sun’s warmth. His lips parted as he drank her in, red-tinted eyes trailing after the patterns his fingertips drew over her slowly flushing skin.

She waited, but the vampire did not answer.

Luella didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

It grew silent between them, but it was not a heavy silence; rather a comfortable sense of security, like curling up with a blanket on a cold winter’s day.

She couldn’t be the only one between them who felt that sense of rightness. He had to feel it, too, at least a little bit. He had said he would protect her, after all. Had granted her the library when she asked for escape.

Maybe Bastian would give her something else if she was only so brave to ask.

"Can I ask you something?" She brushed her pinky over one of the silver rings adorning his ear.

Bastian’s lashes fanned over his cheek as he slowly blinked up at her. The act was sensual grace.

Luella dimly wondered how he had such beautiful, dark lashes. It took her a lot of kohl to get such a sultry look.

"Depends," he answered.

She toyed with the ends of the hair curling against his nape. "On what?"

"If I hear my name from those pretty lips." The vampire smirked up at her, and Luella’s cheeks heated under the intensity of his stare, the promises of acts she didn’t quite understand that lingered in the room.

Luella had made it this far.

"Bastian," she breathed, lowering her eyes to the undone button on his shirt as she spoke. "Bastian, can I ask you something?"

He cupped her cheek and forced her head up; she slowly met his eyes, fearful of what she would see there, what it would mean.

Bastian looked at Luella like she was the very force that kept the stars held aloft in the sky. Like she was the flame crackling in the fireplace.

A force of nature. Powerful.

She swallowed thickly.

"What is it?"

"Before, when you showed me the library…" Luella trailed off, nerves stalling her words, but Bastian’s firm touch kept her grounded. She could do this. She had to. For Az. "Would you grant me a favor again, like before?"

There was something unreadable in his eyes. Luella wasn’t sure what exactly the emotion was. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it. But it made her heart stutter in her chest.

Bastian hummed, a long finger tracing patterns against her waist. "What is it that you want?"

With a shaky breath, Luella spoke before she could talk herself out of it. "Az."

Before she could even blink, the vampire moved.

Bastian locked strong arms around her waist and forced her back to the chair. She fell into it with a quiet sound of protest, but it was quickly overtaken by the startled gasp that fell from her lips as he knocked her legs apart and stepped into the space between them.

A mirror of their earlier position. Except this time, he was the one who towered over her. The one who held the power.

Luella’s hands curled against the soft leather of the seat as she awaited his next move.

Her neck ached as she craned her head to look up at him.

Bastian lodged his hands on the armrests beside her, trapping her fully as he leaned down. "Why?" he gritted out between his teeth. All traces of sultry softness were wiped from his features, leaving a simmering anger.

"I want to make sure he’s okay," Luella managed to express under the weight of his stare.

Bastian shuttered his eyes, a pained expression overtaking him. His head fell, a dark strand of hair falling to brush against his cheek. The visage painted him a sorrowful figure.

"Please?" she breathed.

Luella had nothing to lose, save her life, and that was not hers any longer, a fact she had come to a begrudging acceptance of, leaving her with an unadulterated sense of freedom.

If it weren’t for the fear that followed Luella like a specter, she might say this was the most unrestricted she had ever felt.

Bastian groaned. "Gods, you don’t know how you sound." He raised his head, fingers gentle as he cupped her cheek with both palms. The feel of his hands was soft against her skin, juxtaposed with the dark roil of emotions playing out on his features. "How you look…"

His hands roved down to settle on her shoulders, and he forced her back, flush against the chair. Her spine straightened from the position, and she was utterly helpless.

Maybe it was the dream, the hazy, ethereal quality that permeated her senses, but Luella was emboldened to beg. "*Please*."

"I can’t, pet." He sounded pained.

He lowered to his knees in front of her, large shoulders fitting between her thighs, it made her legs ache with the strain as she was forced to accommodate him. She winced from the stretch, shifting against the seat. Bastian’s eyes sparked with red from her obvious discomfort.

He laid his hands on her thighs, just watching her as she teetered on the edge of desperation.

Luella’s lip wobbled as she forced herself to maintain eye contact with him, her pleas written on her face.

At the look of resignation that fell over his unusually solemn features, Luella felt a tear slip out unbidden.

The show of vulnerability made her fearful. What would he do with it? Prey upon her weakness like the beast she thought him?

It was in those quiet moments, where she thought of only Az, that Luella realized.

"What if—" Her words cut off as Bastian’s head jerked up from the sound of her voice. Maybe time moved differently here in her mind. For all

she knew, it could have been an hour they sat and stared at each other, unmoving in the quiet.

Bastian waited for her to continue.

"What if we made a deal?"

The vampire arched a dark brow. "Oh?" he mused. "And what kind of deal are you thinking, pet?"

"I'll give you something if you let me see Azgorath," Luella said quietly. She waited for him to refuse her offer, but his contemplative look gave her pause.

"Something?" he asked.

Luella knew the way deals worked. Just like a vow made in blood. Both parties had to state their demands, and with a drop of blood crossed over their hearts, the deal was made.

She was desperate. That's why she said, "Anything."

Bastian licked his lips, tracing his tongue over the point of one of his fangs, and Luella couldn't help but feel like she had just freely offered up the last pieces of her soul.

"Not anything!" she hurried to amend.

Bastian gave a soft laugh at her vehemence. "You're learning, pet," he commented.

Luella deigned not to acknowledge her misstep.

"And playing with fire." Bastian skirted his nose down the length of hers, and all thought was swept from her mind like ocean waves ebbing from the shore.

Luella shuddered, hypersensitive to the feel of him against her, his nearness.

She took a moment to compose herself while he watched on with a sly look. The dangling silver earrings adorning his ears glimmered as he shifted, catching the flickering flames roaring in the fireplace. She trailed her fingers up to knock against one, curious. Luella's attention was on the curve of his shoulder, the shape of his ear, his strong and regal jawline, that's why she barely caught how Bastian's face scrunched up at her touch, a small shudder overtaking him—just as she had done moments earlier under the weight of his stare.

Luella bit her lip to hide a smile. She did affect him.

And she couldn't find it in her to care that he was right—she was playing with fire. Hands waving across scorching hot flames. The heat

threatened to burn her skin. A tempting dance they both were participating in; though, she wasn’t sure if it was willing or unwilling.

Bastian pulled away from her slightly, hands resting on her thighs. The thin silk of Luella’s nightgown offered barely any cover to keep her away from the full weight of his skin brushing against hers. He might as well have been touching her bare flesh.

Looking into her eyes, Bastian said, "I will not ask for more than you would be willing to give." He paused, tracing a finger over the neckline of her gown. "I’m not like the others, I’ve told you before. I will push you and test you, but not take more than you can give. Not like Tharen…"

"Tharen?" Luella prodded. "And what about the King?" Her words were hesitant, afraid to disrupt the tentative peace between them.

"Vale may seem more composed, but do not let his kingly nature fool you. Many have fallen prey to that false sense of regality he displays. Dragons are a tempestuous bunch," Bastian said with a huffed laugh. "When he is angry, when what he thinks as his, is threatened…" He shook his head.

Luella didn’t ask him to elaborate. Somehow, she knew King Vale was the most fearsome of them all. Even over Tharen.

She curled her fingers in his shirt. The silk felt so real under her palms.

"A deal?" she prodded.

Bastian ground his jaw before roughly cupping her cheeks and pulling her face close to his. "A kiss."

Luella tried to move her head back, but his grip was unyielding. "A k-kiss?" she stuttered, cheeks puffing from his grip on her face.

His eyes grew half-lidded. "Yes," he hummed. "If you cannot agree…" Bastian pulled back from her a tiny bit, one shoulder shrugging up.

She licked her lips without thought, and the vampire’s eyes fell to her mouth to watch.

"A kiss, and you will let me see Az?" Luella affirmed.

Bastian nodded. "Give me a kiss, and I’ll let you see the demon."

Luella knocked his touch away, bracing her hands on her shoulders as she sat up a bit straighter. From where he was kneeling between her thighs, they were almost the same height—on level footing. It was not a fact that was lost on her, their current balance of position.

She took a moment to think it through, and for the life of her, she couldn’t pinpoint why the vampire would want a kiss from her. She gave

him free rein to ask for almost anything, and in her current state, Luella feared she would give just about anything Bastian would ask of her.

With her vulnerable and pleading, he merely asked for a kiss.

A kiss, she thought, *but Bastian didn't specify where*.

She tried to tamp down the winning smile that threatened to give her innermost musings away.

Bastian mirrored her expression; though, his smile leaned more toward a smirk, lips curved up as he waited for her to do what they both knew she would: agree to his deal.

"Fine," Luella said.

And Bastian gave her an answering grin.

"Good," he murmured, brushing a piece of hair back from her cheek.

If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine the touch was welcome, a caress from a lover, and not the hand of a thief who wished to steal a kiss from her while he also stole away into her dreams.

Luella gripped his shoulders, fingers curling in the soft silk of his shirt.

Slowly, Bastian lifted the tip of his pointer finger to his mouth. Without breaking eye contact, he pricked his finger against his fang, blood welling, as he crossed the bloody finger over his heart, saying, "I vow to let you see Azgorath if you grant me a kiss."

The air grew charged between them. If Luella was worried the vow wouldn't work in this dreamscape, those thoughts were quickly diminished by the familiar charge that permeated the air, just like it had when Az made a blood vow to protect her with his life in the dungeons.

He pulled his hand back, a faint smudge of blood over the pale skin of his chest. He wiped it away with the pad of his thumb, and a tiny, red circle was left. A bargain mark—it would stay on his skin until he fulfilled his end of the deal. Az had one, as well, for his vow made to her.

She was leaving her mark on these males, just as they were leaving invisible ones on her.

Bastian took her hand and made a move to bring it up to his mouth, but Luella jerked it back.

"No," she practically hissed, fear simmering in her blood at the prospect of his fangs anywhere near her.

Bastian rolled his eyes. "If you do not let me prick your finger, how will you draw blood?" He gave a pointed look at the hazy room they were in.

There were no sharp objects. The quickest option was easily to let the vampire prick her finger, but she couldn’t dare allow him to draw blood.

"How do I know that you will not forgo our deal and decide to take me for yourself once you taste my blood?"

"Nothing," Bastian said without inflection, and the sound of his voice made Luella’s heart come to an abrupt standstill. "You’ll have to trust me."

"Trust you." Luella scoffed. Now, it was her turn to roll her eyes.

Bastian gripped the side of her neck. "What did I say about disrespect?"

She jerked her head to the side to dispel his grip. His hand fell to her shoulder, and he was quick to encompass the expanse of her arm, circling his hand around her upper arm as he held her pinned to the seat.

"I would say you would not enjoy my type of punishment, but that would be a lie. I think it would be most enjoyable for you," he breathed against her cheeks, her flesh pebbling at his proximity.

Desperation clawed at her. This was her only chance, and she wouldn’t give it up because of fear.

She pulled back and looked him in the eyes. "Don’t hurt me," she whispered.

And on the heels of that plea, she moved her hand from where she had tucked it against her chest and placed it in the air between them, hovering, waiting for him to reach out and take it.

Bastian did so with a soft smile, less sly and more sensual. Ever so slightly, he brought her hand to his mouth, lips parting and fangs gleaming. Luella’s shoulders shook. She was giving him the power to kill her, and she waited with bated breath to see what he would do with that power.

Brushing the pad of his thumb over the back of her hand, Bastian did something unexpected. Instead of coldly piercing her finger with his fang, he gently sucked the tip of her pointer finger into his mouth, tongue resting against the underside of it.

Luella’s breath caught.

"What…" she breathed.

Bastian merely drew her finger deeper into his mouth, looking up at her through thick lashes. Her bare toes curled in the carpet, thighs aching from how Bastian was fit between them. But it wasn’t an unpleasant ache. Strangely, she found herself wishing that ache would follow her out of this dream and haunt her throughout the day, in a reminder of this moment.

He pulled her finger out of his mouth, a long string of saliva connecting them. It was lewd and untamed. And she wanted more.

They did not look away from each other as he drew her finger back to her mouth, this time resting the tip of it against his fang, not piercing it yet, just letting her see the sharpness, feel the threat of the prick, and all that those teeth were capable of.

A gasp left Luella’s mouth as Bastian gently ran her finger over his fang. Not gasp from pain, but rather from the feel of him around her; his wet mouth, his prodding tongue, and even the sharpness of his fangs, offering a dichotomy of feeling to the softness of his lips.

What would that mouth feel like against hers?

What would those fangs feel like tracing against her neck?

Bastian groaned low at the taste of her blood in his mouth, the vibration thrumming up her hand from where they were connected. With control she wasn’t aware vampires could exhibit, he pulled her blood-tipped finger away and ran it along his lower lip, painting it in her blood like scarlet rouge.

With a wet, red glisten on his lips, Bastian said, "Hurry."

Luella pulled her finger back. He eyed the slight shake of her hand but didn’t say anything. She pressed her finger over her heart as she spoke.

"This day—or night," Luella started, fumbling as she tried to mimic his earlier surety, "I vow to grant a kiss to you in exchange for seeing Azgorath."

With a crackle in the air that was reminiscent of the embers in the fireplace, the vow was sealed between them. The place over her heart warmed slightly.

That was the first time she had ever partaken in a deal or vow made in blood. The slight tingle on her chest made her curious, and she wiped away the blood with the back of her hand. A red circle was etched onto her chest, a twin mark to the one on Bastian’s chest.

The pinprick on her finger was shallow, and it had already stopped bleeding. But that didn’t stop Bastian from fisting a hand in the fabric of her nightgown, nostrils flaring.

"So…" Luella hedged.

Bastian ran a hand along her thigh. "A kiss, then."

Her cheeks warmed. Bastian would be her second kiss. Her inexperience weighed on her. She fidgeted with her fingers, and his other

hand rested atop them, forcing her to stop her fumbling.

"Nervous, pet?"

She gulped. "No." But she didn’t sound convincing in the slightest.

"Don’t be." He leaned closer to her. "I saw you. With him."

She blushed at the reminder Bastian had walked in on her kiss with Graves.

"I saw his lips on yours. The way you melted into him, even though he stole that first from you… Let me steal the second. I’ll make it good for you."

"Okay," Luella forced out. Not because she wanted to—*liar*, her mind whispered—but because she *had* to.

"Then kiss me." Bastian ran a finger down her cheek and over to her lips, tracing along the outline.

As she opened her mouth to speak, his finger slipped back into her mouth. "But I’ve only been kissed once." Her words were hesitant; she wanted to explain away her tenacity and make it known she wasn’t nervous because of *him* but because she was untrained in intimacy.

"Fuck," he groaned. "I’ll kill him for tasting you before me."

Bastian cupped her cheeks, and their heads were level as he pulled her closer to his face and ghosted his mouth over hers. Her inhale was shaky, and her eyes fluttered shut.

"The bargain was that you would kiss me, not the other way around." Bastian brushed a thumb across her cheekbone, stilling as he waited for her to move and close the distance between their mouths.

Her plan was in her head. Her words were chosen carefully as she spoke of the deal. But the temptation was there, resting right before her. She could move forward and touch her lips against his and discover if those fangs would sting as he kissed her.

The temptation was pulling her, but her resolve was a stronger force.

Luella caressed a finger over his ear, attention caught on the silver rings adorning the lobe. Bastian’s head lowered just a fraction, and it was enough.

With his gaze trained on the quick rise and fall of her chest, she moved.

Luella moved forward, a hand against his strong jaw as she quickly turned his face to the side. Her lips met the skin of his cheek. He was soft and warm in this dream. It made her want to repeat the action when she awoke and see if it would feel different.

Just as suddenly as she had initiated the kiss, Luella pulled away, back pressing against the chair and thighs straining as she waited for Bastian to look at her and release his anger at being slighted.

Her chest burned, the bargain mark disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. She pulled the neck of her gown away to reveal unmarked skin. Luella's end of the deal had been fulfilled.

Dark hair fell over Bastian's forehead as he hung his head, shoulders shaking. His palms came to rest against her thighs with a slight slap, and she jolted.

"Gods," Bastian grumbled. "You've proven smarter than we thought of you."

Luella inwardly scoffed. They've spoken of her intellect and found it lacking. She would prove she was *more* than they had ever imagined.

Bastian raised his head, and the trepidation curling low in her gut abated from the look of dark amusement he gave her.

"Neither of us outlined *where* I was to kiss you," Luella explained with a low tone, nerves making her words come out trembling and soft.

Bastian stood, leaving her splayed out on the chair indecently, with her gown rucked up and thighs spread. "Right, you are, pet."

He brushed off his knees and held out a hand. She took it timidly, and he pulled her to stand, tugging her into his body, where she fell against him.

Bastian huffed a sigh of agitation, revealing that he wasn't as fine as he projected about her deception.

He looked down at her, lip curving up into the beginnings of a coy smirk. Brushing a thumb over her brow, he pressed it against her forehead.

"Fine," he said with a throaty grumble. The air was already becoming hazy and distorted around her as Bastian forced her body to wake. "Two can play at that game."

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ROSE THORNS

The scent of apples made her lips curl in disgust.

Luella puffed air out between her teeth, a golden curl tickling against her cheek.

"When you asked to go to the gardens, I didn’t think it would be to sulk," Graves commented from behind her.

She startled, turning her head to eye the raven shifter. His cowl was pulled below his chin, but his hood was over his head, obscuring his eyes, leaving only his mouth revealed to her; a scar cut along the side of his lips, barely visible from the shadows of his cloak.

Luella blushed as she watched his mouth.

A mouth that turned up at the corners, like he knew what she was thinking.

She quickly turned her head away, hand drifting up to brush against the low-hanging limbs of the trees they were walking among.

"You didn’t have to come," she said.

"I did," Graves replied with a voice like gravel.

Always one for little words.

Luella wanted to pry open his mind and peek inside, discover his secrets and desires and whims. And discover what had led him to kiss her the other evening…

At the thought of secrets and minds, her sour mood returned. After she had awoken from her not-dream, she had shot out of bed and paced the

length of her room like a caged animal. Ina and Osa had swept in to prepare her for breakfast. Luella didn’t remember much; she had been too stuck in her head.

Bastian made himself scarce. He was avoiding her. As soon as she entered the dining room and sat at the table, he shot up like she was diseased and made some hurried excuse about a meeting before leaving.

She wasn’t the only one who was perplexed by his odd behavior. Tharen had mentioned Bastian would benefit from a… good lay to rid him of that chaotic energy. Well, a *good lay* wasn’t the exact term the mage had used, but—

That led her to where she was now, walking in the gardens with Graves.

Luella had hesitantly voiced her request, waiting for it to be overturned by the King, who had sat at the head of the table with a hard and unreadable expression. But the raven shifter had stepped in, saying he’d take her. She was thankful Tharen hadn’t interfered.

The strange restlessness that had plagued her from being cooped up indoors slowly settled into a distant hum instead of a groaning roar, but perhaps she hadn’t been as secretive as she had hoped in hiding her twitching and fidgeting.

A gloved hand brushed over her shoulder. "It’s done good for you to get outside."

Luella swallowed and turned to face Graves, hands clasped in front of her.

"It helps calm me," she decided to reveal.

He hummed, contemplative, and reached up to pluck an apple from one of the tree limbs. The late morning sun warmed her cheeks through the cracks in the branches and leaves. She turned her face up to it, basking in the warmth.

"Here."

Luella opened her eyes to see a red apple held in front of her and arched a brow. Graves pushed it closer to her, and she lifted a hand to bat it away.

"I just ate breakfast," she said.

Graves took one of her hands and unlocked her fingers, placing the apple in her palm. "No, you didn’t."

"Yes, I did." A line of confusion etched between her brow. "You were there. You saw."

"You didn’t eat enough. You barely touched your plate," Graves retorted.

He wasn’t wrong. Luella had barely eaten her breakfast, her mind too preoccupied with *everything*. The Fates, the supposed creatures called the Umbra and Tenebrae, the book in the library, plans of escape, Az…

As she weighed the apple in her hands, Graves gently tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. She shivered from the feel of his gloved hands along the side of her cheek. It seemed like she was always *too* aware of him.

Bergamot clouded her senses, and she moved her nose to her cheek to get a breath of fresh air and steel herself from the pull she felt toward him.

Graves watched her silently, the lower half of his face revealing nothing to her.

Luella pressed the apple back into his hands. Or tried to, at least. He could be tenacious, like a hound with a scent trail, when he had his mind set on something.

"I don’t need it," she said, trying to return the apple to him.

Graves tucked his hands behind his back, the side of his lip twitching.

It was sometimes hard for her to reconcile the male standing before her to the one she had first met—a silent shadow standing above her in the quiet of the forest. Vengeful, violent, and taciturn.

With a huff, Luella gave up and turned, walking deeper into the orchard.

She ignored Graves’s low rumble of satisfaction at having won, instead focusing on the array of flowers and clover crowding the ground. A few petals were wilted in this deep winter they were in, but some were ever-bountiful, always blossoming, just like the apple trees, enchanted to stay pristine, even in the harshest of conditions.

Luella crouched down, a hand pulling her shawl snug around her shoulders to ward off the nippy, late-morning air. The hem of her gown dragged in the dirt, but she paid it no mind, entranced by the little corner of life in this kingdom of wickedness.

Who knew a court of serpents could be home to such beauty?

She cocked her head as she trailed a finger along a yellow flower petal, tracing along the edges and down the vibrant green stem. The leaves held a faint shimmer, barely perceptible if you squinted, but she knew what it was—enchantments keeping it safe in the off-season.

Her fingers dug into the red flesh of the apple as she shifted her position. The next flower to catch her attention had petals of white snow, drooping downwards like a bell. These did not have any such enchantments, winter-bred flowers that would need extra care during the warmer months.

The clearing of a throat interrupted her perusal.

Standing, Luella hurriedly fluffed out the skirts of her periwinkle gown, holding the apple close to her chest as she turned.

Instead of Graves watching behind her, she was met with the sight of King Vale, crown gleaming in the faint rays of sun peaking through the foliage.

"King… King Vale." Luella took a step back as he advanced closer to her, his stride purposeful.

He wore no cloak, and the laces of his half-tucked shirt were partly undone. Her heart kicked up to a fluttering beat as she awaited what he would do.

She looked for Graves, nervous to be alone in such a secluded spot with the King—he was the one she had spent the least amount of time with. Even Tharen, she could predict to a certain extent, but not the King.

With glinting green eyes, King Vale stopped before her.

"Don’t let me interrupt," he said, gesturing to the flowers behind her. He appeared pleased for some reason unbeknownst to her and more intimidating, the regal angles of his face striking against the backdrop of greenery, painting him as some vengeful ruler stranded in woodlands.

"No. I’m done," Luella said softly and looked behind her, relief flooding her when she finally spotted Graves, where he stood against a tree.

She tried to offer comfort to herself with lies that he was there to protect her, but she knew the truth. Safety was a long-gone prospect. If King Vale so wished, he could do anything to her, regardless of whether the raven shifter was around or not.

"Very well."

A few twigs snapped under his boots as he walked closer. Luella forced herself not to move further away from him.

"Walk with me," he ordered.

King Vale offered an elbow to her, and the hand that held the apple trembled slightly as she took it with her free hand, carefully resting her palm in the crook of his arm. It felt like an ocean was between them, her arm stretching in an unpleasant way to breach the distance.

"Do you really think that is close enough?" The King tutted under his breath and jerked her closer to his side. His body emanated a constant warmth, and in the bright bite of this sunny winter’s day, she melted into it.

The King started a casual stroll, resuming the path she had been on.

Her head whipped as she searched for Graves, only to find him a few paces behind, hands locked behind him as his dark cloak fluttered about with every step. His hood was pushed back, his cowl under his chin. She marveled at the sight of his dangerous beauty.

Luella’s palm grew clammy against the apple. "What do you want?"

"What don’t I want?" King Vale countered. He looked down at her, and she tried not to quake under his attention. "Everything," he continued. "You."

She stumbled a step. "Me?"

"Yes, *you*. I have your freedom, but I’m finding I’m not as satisfied with that as I thought I would be."

King Vale led her down a fork in the path, a winding way cutting back to the castle, she assumed. The canopy of trees grew thinner as they walked, more and more flowers popping up, along with a familiar maze of gravel etching patterns into the ground.

"What else could you possibly want from me?" She tried to temper her tone, but a fierceness threatened to betray the swirl of anger teeming within.

"*Everything*. I want to possess everything," the King answered, words carrying a surety that made her grow sick. "And when you find you have nothing left to give, I will take more."

With that resounding demand hanging between them, King Vale spun her quickly, the act reminiscent of the few dances they shared in the throne room. Her feet answered his silent demand, expertly tracking along the dirt pathway until she spun to a stop on a collection of rocks. They poked through the thin soles of her slippers, but she did not move, forcing her body to still as the King advanced once more.

Her chest rose and fell with unsteady breaths as she faced him. He stood on a patch of green grass, the sun shining down around them both. He took a step forward, and she took a step back, feet tripping on the rocks as she was cornered.

A sly, serpent-like grin stretched King Vale’s lips as he moved closer. Luella didn’t break eye contact with him. Somehow, she knew if she did,

she would lose this unsaid game they were playing. All it would take was one misstep, and she feared the King would pounce.

Her calves bumped into a rough surface, and Luella couldn’t go back anymore. She was trapped. And King Vale was almost upon her.

His boots crunched on the gravel as he approached, the scent of burning wood acting as a traitorous comfort, lulling her into a sense of security.

Luella refused to let her walls down.

King Vale stepped into her orbit, hand brushing over her shoulder. "Familiar place, hm?"

And at those words, Luella broke. Her eyes left his as she looked at where he had led her.

Artfully trimmed bushes lined the castle walls, perfect pathways of green grass, a stone bench tucked halfway into a small alcove nestled against the stone walls of the castle, and a collection of blooming roses.

Her face grew pale as the memories assaulted her.

Hands against her waist. Choked screams. Curling vines.

Squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

Blood dripping and breath rattling.

Thorns and tangles of rope-like roots.

Treye.

He had attacked her *here*, outside the throne room.

Luella staggered against the stone bench, sitting without grace. Her slippers made indents on the tiny patch of grass, and she remembered the way her bare feet had sunk into it that night; red blood had painted the tips of the green blades.

"Not a pleasant memory?" King Vale asked, sitting down beside her.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

The stone was rough under her hands, but she welcomed it. The bite was grounding against the waves of thoughts attempting to drown her.

King Vale rested a large palm atop her knee. "He cannot hurt you anymore."

"I know," Luella said softly. "I just—"

"What is it?"

"I had forgotten," she started. "The fear." A wave of trembles made her shake. The wintry air grew frigid, and she pulled her shawl tighter around her.

"Don’t tell me you have forgotten what that kind of fear feels like." King Vale suddenly gripped her knee tighter. His rings cut into her thighs. "Do you need a reminder?" he hissed, voice sinful and low, akin to the wicked creature she knew him to be.

"N-no." Her voice shook, and the King smirked at the sound of her prominent fear, unable to be hidden just as he desired.

The King pulled back, smugness marring his regal features.

Luella wished to knock that crown off of his head and mess up that perfect sense of regality he took such care to maintain.

King Vale reached for the rose bush near the bench, pensive as he trailed a finger over the petals.

"The walls have been repaired," Luella commented. She was hesitant to voice her observation. The King and the others seemed aggrieved by any mention of the attack, but Luella needed information—no matter how she went about receiving it.

She could never even tell the walls outside of the throne room had been destroyed barely a couple of weeks prior. The stone was perfect once more, and the grounds were unmarred by the heaps of rubble and churned dirt that had littered it after the attack.

Right around the corner, there would be grand glass doors leading to the inside of the throne room. If Luella closed her eyes, she could still remember the sounds of the courtiers, drunken revelers and raucous partiers, enjoying pleasures of the flesh without care until that wild revelry turned to bloodshed.

Screams of pleasure that had turned to ones of pain.

Luella’s knuckles grew white as she gripped the stone bench underneath her.

King Vale hummed an affirmative, not caring enough to comment further.

She ground her jaw at the blatant disrespect. But what did she expect? She was his prisoner. A war prize, stripped of rights. To the King, Luella was a mere object.

She averted her gaze, only to find Graves standing sentinel against an apple tree, shrouded in shadows. His lip tilted up as she peered over at him, the scar on his face standing out starkly against the dark shadows. He made no other move to make her think he took notice of her discomfort, her fear.

"So much has changed since you cowered behind this bench that night."

Luella’s head turned to find King Vale looking at her with rapt attention. His green eyes glinted in the sunlight, and against the backdrop of red roses, it made him look all the more untouchable. Golden hair, golden crown, green eyes, red apples, red roses.

He was perfect. And she was just… her.

She nodded.

A lot *had* changed. Luella still felt fear, but she had grown accustomed to it. That sick churning in her belly was a familiar friend now. Luella knew how to live with dread. Anxiety used to be an acquaintance, but now she thought it to be a close friend. More of a companion than anyone she had ever met in her short and sorry existence.

"It has," Luella said, "and it hasn’t."

The King arched a brow. "How so?"

She worried her lip with her teeth, thinking about how to share her thoughts—if she even should. It seemed no one got her like herself. Why bother trying to explain the mass of feelings in her head when she could just deal with it alone?

King Vale brushed a hand over her shoulder, pulling the edge of her shawl closer around her shoulders. The gesture was possessive. He waited for her to speak, and she caught Graves’s eye in the distance.

The raven shifter gave her a nod of encouragement—or a demand to hurry lest she anger the King with her unwillingness to cooperate.

So Luella said, "I’m still that frightened creature. I’ve just learned how to hide it…"

"Good." But his expression made her think it was anything but. "Smart. Never show weakness, Princess. If you live by that, you may just make it out of here alive."

A figure of speech, she was sure. Luella knew, in his eyes, there would be no making it out of Serpentis, especially not alive.

She sat back against the bench, all of the unease leaving her lethargic and bereft of care as she slumped, shoulders caving inward.

The rose bush beside her tickled against the back of her head. It stretched behind the bench and along the sides of the wall, encasing the castle in borders of thorny beauty.

Luella reached out and traced a finger along the stem of a rose. "Why must pretty things have such sharp edges?"

King Vale shot her a look. "Like you?" he asked, tone infused with a rare gentleness, a confounded sense of belief playing behind those green eyes.

"Me?" Luella scoffed. "I'm neither sharp nor pretty." She tucked her hand back in her lap, fingers toying with the fabric of her gown.

The King settled a heavy hand against her knee, right over where her hands fidgeted. The weight of his palm warmed her skin, and she tried not to flinch away from the unwanted touch.

"Do not try to fool me with your false sense of modesty."

At her look of sadness, the King paused, thumb rubbing firm circles against the top of her hand. "You do not think you're pretty?"

Luella sighed under her breath, a low, forlorn sound. She was too tired to play games of court and politics any longer. Too tired of thinly veiled niceties and pretty lies.

The first honest thing she thought she had ever said to the King tumbled from her lips. "It's hard to think you're pretty when you spend your whole life treated like a blight. Like something to be ashamed of…" She trailed off under the weight of his stare.

He looked at her like she was something worthy to be looked at, even as his prisoner. Luella wasn't used to such attention. And especially not from someone like him.

The King gripped her hand tighter, the slow touch turning to a fierce claim. "You are very beautiful, Luella. Take hold of that beauty. Wield it. Sharpen it like a sword." King Vale cupped her cheeks between his hands and pulled her face up to his.

She was ensnared by him, utterly captivated by his presence, his ferocity, and unfettered regard.

"Wars are not won with might alone, but with cunning and charm to win the masses and trick your enemies—" He stopped abruptly like he revealed more than he had planned.

Luella combed through the words he had so fervently uttered but could only come back to one thing: *your enemies.*

Her brow furrowed at the strange choice and his insistence. "I do not have any enemies to trick."

Except for him, but Luella would not share that. Perhaps *that* was the trick he was referring to. Maybe he knew of her plot to escape and was

merely sitting back and waiting for her to act before condemning her to the dungeons where she would wither and die.

Palms spanning over her cheeks, he huffed, and Luella swore she could see the faintest swirls of smoke curl from his nostrils. "Kingdoms rise and fall for a beauty like yours, Princess."

Quiet as a hushed, snowy dawn, King Vale reached behind her, the sleeve of his shirt brushing against her shawl as he reached for a rose. He could have retrieved one from the bush nearest to him, but ever one for games of superiority, the King deigned to assert a claim and take from the one closest to her.

King Vale plucked a rose from the bush and stood. He towered over her, the stem of the rose dangling from his fingers. As he leaned down over her, her hands gripped the edges of the stone bench. Warm breath puffed over her chilled skin as he leaned over her, hand gently tucking the rose behind her ear. Luella winced as the thorns dug into her scalp.

A silent challenge played out between them.

Would she cower? Or withstand this test?

The King straightened and held out a hand.

"It’s the prettiest flowers that have the sharpest of thorns," he said with a soft voice, taking her in.

They both seemed to be equally entranced as she placed her palm in his and allowed him to help her stand. Luella’s knees were weak under her, and the heat from his flesh was scorching with barely contained dragon fire.

Fingertips brushed over the point of her ear, tracing the red petals of the rose that mingled with the gold of her curls.

He whispered low between them, "Yours just haven’t come in yet…"

As the King pulled away from her, Luella was struck by his image.

The sun cast a golden halo around him, turning him into an angel instead of the wicked being she knew him as—the King was more demonic in nature than Az.

"And darling," King Vale drawled. "I eagerly await seeing you in full bloom."

Then, he left.

Back turned to Luella as he walked away proudly, leaving her with a thorny rose tucked behind her ear and the memory of his hot skin as it brushed over her cheek. His head was held high, crown gleaming, and

shoulders set back. The branches seemed to bend to accommodate him, and the very ground appeared to quake under his step.

Or maybe that was just the sound of her thundering heart.

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NOT IN YOUR DREAMS (KISS ME)

Luella curled her hands to her chest, breathing slow and even in the quiet of early night. But her mind wouldn't cease its incessant thinking.

When would Bastian fulfill his end of their bargain and let her see her demon?

She mentally berated herself for not putting a time limit on the bargain. The vampire had looked so smug when he forced her to awaken. What tricks did he have up his sleeve?

Could she actually escape?

Her plan to flee through the tunnels in the library was foolish at best—deadly at worst.

Did King Vale have anything to do with the Umbra and the so-called Tenebrae?

Luella remembered overhearing him in the library the other night. The mentions of the prophecy. So uncanny they would utter the very words she had just learned. Every little piece of the puzzle was laid out in her mind, waiting to be put together; Luella just couldn't quite fit the pieces the way they should be. Odds and ends, grating against each other as she forced everything into a semblance of a disjointed picture.

Her fingers gripped the sheet and pulled it close to her chin. Groggy with the fleeting promise of dreams, her hand snaked out of the cocoon of the covers and laid, palm up, against the mattress. Her eyes watered from

the action. Half-asleep, and she was reaching for someone who couldn’t come.

The evocation of the way Az gripped her fingers through the iron bars made her heart yearn for him.

Perhaps absence did make the heart grow fonder. Coupled with their shared trauma, forced to rely on him in the dungeons, and Luella was helpless to find solace from the thought of him.

With the memory of Az’s intoxicating scent of burnt sugar and cocoa tingling in her nose, Luella fell asleep.

A hand brushed over her forehead.

She mumbled, swiping it away, eyes closed as she snuggled deeper into the firmness she was resting against.

A low laugh reverberated through her.

Hands stroking her waist.

But she had fallen asleep alone…

Luella’s eyes blearily opened.

Flames crackled in the all-too-familiar fireplace, and a strange rush of dread and relief swept through her.

Her chin nudged against the chest she was curled into.

"Bastian?" she croaked.

The vampire hummed under her.

"What am I doing here?" Languid, Luella’s toes curled.

"We made a bargain, did we not?" Bastian replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Ice water cascaded over her, and so quick that it made black dots spot her vision, she sat up, one hand braced against his shoulder as the other rested against the back of the armchair. Her legs dangled over his thighs, and the tips of her toes hovered over the soft rug decorating the floor.

She distantly wondered where the image of this place had come from. Was it Bastian’s design—his touch gracing the dark shade painting the walls and the exact leather make of the chair they were seated upon?

"What of our bargain, Bastian? You said you would take me to see Az."

Bastian let out a low, treacherous laugh. "Pet, really? I thought you would have learned by now."

He nudged her to stand with a hand pushing against her shoulders. She did so with a slight sway to her step. How could Luella feel tired in a dream?

Standing from the chair, Bastian towered over her, hands coming to rest on her shoulders as he spun her. With her back now to Bastian, Luella saw what he meant.

Az stood silently against the wall, the orange glow of the flames from the crackling fire cast shadows of warmth on his tanned skin. It reminded Luella of their time in the dungeons, the faint candlelight that had cascaded throughout the dank cells from the sconces in the hallways, turning him into a being made from the most forgotten of fires, just like the demon he was.

Luella’s lower lip trembled. She looked back to Bastian, who stood smug and sensual as always, before casting her watery, golden eyes back to the demon haunting the corners of her dream.

In this space of her mind, Az did not wear any chains or iron manacles. His chest was bare, gleaming, and lined with muscles that spoke of his strength.

She took a tiny step forward, fearful somehow that the spell would be broken. Maybe this was not a dream of Bastian’s making but one of her own. Would she wake up and dispel the haze of desire that pulsed within the depths of her soul, find out that it was all a mirage, founded by her wants and hopes?

"Lu," Az uttered in the quiet of the room.

She could not speak. The fire crackled in an answer to his beckoning.

Bastian was a wall of warmth behind her, urging her onward with firm palms against her back. The hem of her silk nightgown tickled against the bare skin of her thighs, the pale expanse pebbled not with chill but heat from the twin flames of their attentions that burned over her flesh.

This time, it was Az that came to her.

The demon’s large hands engulfed the sides of her head as he held her still and scoured every bit of her, looking for anything out of place.

"You’re okay?" Az asked, tone gruff and persistent.

Luella nodded, all too aware of the vampire at her back and his ears that listened. How would she ever follow through with her plan if she couldn’t find a moment alone with Az?

"Speak to me. Please," Az urged. "The sound of your voice has haunted me. Help me know everything was real."

"What do you want me to say?" Luella quietly asked.

His eyes searched hers, and for a singular moment, she forgot all about the worries and prophecies and darkness that plagued her mind. She imagined she was the runaway daughter of a farmer or merchant, stealing away in the night to visit a starry-eyed admirer.

The demon brushed a thumb over the soft curve of her cheek like he heard her thoughts.

The spell was disrupted as Az pulled away. His eyes shot amber-colored daggers at the vampire at her back.

"Are you happy now?" Az growled. "This is torture. Worse than the dungeons."

Bastian settled a possessive hand on Luella’s nape. "Would you really deny her of what she asked for?"

Casting his eyes downward, Az’s shoulders sunk forward. He seemed defeated as he replied, "No."

The solemn resignation on Az’s usually warm features—sometimes Luella could even call his appearance soft when he looked at her—made anger bubble up within her. She whirled on Bastian, pressing a finger against his chest. His hands raised, palms held outward, as he looked down his nose at her, sultry passion mingling with irritation.

"You tricked me," Luella hissed.

"Tricked you?" Bastian laughed. "I only gave what I got. If you cannot handle the burn of the flames, don’t play with fire."

Her jaw clenched in consternation, an unfamiliar call resonating deep within her chest; she nearly staggered back under the weight of it. It felt like… No, it couldn’t be. She was nothing. She had no magic. And never would.

It was simply the fizzling end of their duplicitous bargain.

She held eye contact with Bastian as she reached for the top button of his shirt. The silk was cool under her hands as she slowly unbuttoned it. Az growled behind her but made no move to stop her. She was grateful for that tiny show of trust. Such a rarity in her life.

As she undid the top few buttons, Luella pushed back the neckline of Bastian’s shirt, only to reveal smooth pale skin. No bargain marks, no remainder of their deal.

It was done.

Luella’s hands curled into fists against the material of Bastian’s shirt. Somehow, she had hoped the vampire would be different, but she guessed not. Hope was such a fickle thing. Even if she tried to abstain, somehow, little threads had a way of weaving into her life and disrupting everything when it proved fruitless.

"I will always win, pet," Bastian said softly. The words were a mockery of an assurance. It only made her hatred burn hotter, just like the very flames Bastian had accused her of playing with.

If he felt slighted by her not-kiss, she would just have to give him what he wanted.

"Kiss me," Luella demanded.

Bastian’s brows rose. "I thought we had already been down this road before. Don’t tell me your fickle fae memory is that short-lived. Or perhaps you want to taste me as much as I do you."

Her cheeks burned, even as she forced herself to reply, "Another deal, Bastian. This time, I’ll give you what you want. A kiss on the lips."

Az let out a rumbling growl. "Fuck no," he seethed.

She turned to find the demon with hands curled into fists as he tried to stop himself from lunging forward.

Golden hair covered the side of her cheek, obscuring her lips from Bastian as she mouthed, *Trust me.*

The jealous fury marring Az’s expression did not dim, but he refrained from further comment. It would have to be enough for now. Soon, they would be out of here, and Luella could explain.

"What do you get out of this deal, pet? And don’t say it’s the pleasure of my touch. I’ll give that freely if you only ask," Bastian crooned.

"A moment alone with Az." Luella’s words were carefully uttered. She didn’t dare say more.

Bastian scoffed. "No."

She tried not to let his refusal fill her with dismay. "Why not?" she persisted, hands smoothing over the wrinkles she had made by fisting the delicate silk of his shirt. Her touch was curious and light, but searching as she begged him to grant her this.

"I will not fall for this again. I don’t know what you could possibly want with Azograth alone, but forget it. It’s not happening." Bastian removed her hands from his chest, only a moment of hesitancy relaying that he felt the

simmering heat that burned between them, just as she did—Luella preyed on it like a starved animal.

"Please," she breathed, mouth parting as she implored him to listen.

Bastian gave a pained groan, throaty and sinful. "Fuck me for falling for this," he muttered low under his breath. He brought his hand up to his mouth, a fang quickly slicing the tip of his pointer finger. "And fuck you for being so damn enticing." She didn't think she had ever heard him curse so much; usually, Tharen was the one with a foul mouth. Bastian's finger hovered over his chest, sternness overtaking his features as he said, "If you do not agree to the conditions, that's on you. I will not concede further."

Then, he pressed it against his chest, blood crossing over the pale skin of his heart.

"A kiss on the lips from you at any time of my choosing," Bastian amended with a sly grin. "In exchange, I will grant you exactly one minute alone with Azgorath."

Her heart stalled. Would it be enough?

Before Bastian could take her hand and prick her finger, Az was there. His mouth was downturned in displeasure as he gently took her hand in his grasp. His large hand almost completely swallowed up hers as he lowered his head, curls of dark hair brushing against her skin as he carefully pricked the tip of her pinky against the sharp point of a curved horn. She didn't even feel the pain.

Blood beaded at the tip, and Az brushed down the corner of Luella's neckline, warm fingers skimming over the swell of her chest as he pressed her finger against her chest. He was quick to pull away. Blood oaths and bargains could not be forced. It had to be her own decision.

"Go ahead," Az said with a tiny smile, giving her a brief glimpse into the soft beast she had come to know.

And she did. Luella quickly uttered the confines of their deal, a mirror to what Bastian had said.

All the while, she tried to ignore the fluttering of a thousand butterfly wings in her stomach at the undeniable prospect of kissing the vampire. Luella's earlier trickery had been futile, and a small part of her barely cared. A larger part of her was intrigued by the idea…

Her chest warmed as the deal was put into place. She did not look down to see the mark this time. From how Bastian spoke, she feared he would

take time to call on her end of the deal, make her wait, and keep the claim burned into her skin as a reminder that fighting was pointless.

He won in the end.

"Well, pet." With a flick of Bastian’s hand, a pocketwatch materialized out of thin air. Luella wasn’t shocked. It was a dream, after all. He flipped open the lid, revealing a ticking clock face. "One minute," he reminded. Form growing faint, ripples shimmering around the air before Bastian was gone altogether.

Then, it was Luella and Az.

She met his warm amber eyes, and it took everything in her not to spend the little time they had alone weeping in memory of hands curling around hers through iron bars and fingers carding through the tangles in her dirtied hair.

But Luella had to use this time well. She had sold her lips for it, after all.

Twin footfalls against the floor, and they met each other in a crash of her shaking hands against his firm foundation, catching her when she nearly fell against him. His chest gleamed in the light of the fire, and Luella felt her mouth grow dry.

"We don’t have much time," Luella breathed, hands resting against Az’s forearms as he held her tightly against his bare chest. "We have to get out of here." Her voice was low and quiet, fearful that Bastian could somehow hear.

Az shook his head. "It is not safe for you. If they catch us…" His fingers flexed against her waist. "I don’t care what they do to me, but they’ll throw you back into the dungeons. You’re not made for that. It will kill you," he said emphatically.

"I know a way."

"How?" Az lowered his head, eyes beseeching.

Her whole front pressed to his as she rose on her tiptoes and tugged on a curl of his hair, urging the demon to bend down further. She whispered into his ear, "The tunnels that run throughout the kingdom. I found an opening deep in the library."

Az grew rigid and pulled back. Their faces were a mere breath apart. Hands rose to cup her cheeks, and she nuzzled into him, eyes drifting closed from his proximity.

"Lu." Az urged her to look at him with a finger under her chin. As she met his eyes, she was bombarded with a litany of unsaid questions weighing heavily in the air between them. But there was no time… "Those tunnels are not safe."

"Please, Az, trust me," Luella pleaded. "It’s either take a chance in the tunnels or wither away here."

Resigned, Az let out a sigh. "You’ve been waiting for me?" he asked.

"Always," she replied. "I wouldn’t leave you here."

Nodding, Az said, "Okay. *Okay*." He brushed a finger over her cheek as he spoke. "We’ll do this, Lu. But you have to follow my lead. I will come for you. Wait for me."

Her mouth parted as she drew a shaky breath, eyes shifting to look about the room. Was their time up?

"Angel, eyes on me," Az commanded. "Say it. Promise me you will wait for me. Don’t make rash decisions."

"I promise," she vowed.

And before Az could reply, the air grew heavy around them. Bastian’s form took shape in the armchair, lounging with an expectant expression.

"Damn," he cursed, brushing an invisible wrinkle out of his impeccable silk shirt as he rested a crooked leg atop his knee. "I thought I would have caught you both in a compromising position."

Az growled in reply, pulling away from Luella with a careful reminder of what they had just agreed upon simmering in the depth of his eyes.

Luella gave an imperceptible nod.

She would wait for him.

Hope had her wishing it would be soon that he would follow through on his promise to come for her.

"I’m not like you, vampire. I don’t give into my basal impulses," Az spat.

Bastian gave a bitter laugh. "Really?" he taunted. "You expect me to believe if you had her willing, you wouldn’t act upon it?" He steepled his fingers as he regarded them, and even though she wasn’t the object of his scrutiny—this time—apprehension stilled her tongue.

The words Bastian had said with such conviction made Luella’s skin flush in a strange awareness.

And found herself waiting for what Az’s response would be.

He didn’t disappoint.

"I don’t take from the unwilling."

That was all the demon said. Somehow, it was more than enough. She felt safe with him. Luella knew he would never take what she wasn’t freely offering. The same couldn’t be said for the others; even Bastian had preyed upon her desperation and used it to steal a kiss.

Standing, Bastian called, "Come, pet." He crooked his finger, and she went to him begrudgingly, wishing she could remain in Az’s arms.

Even in a dream, the demon pulled her to him.

Bastian looked her over. "He truly didn’t touch you?" His tone was astonished.

"No," she replied.

He hummed in response, muttering something low under his breath about self-control.

Lifting a hand, Bastian shifted his head to where Az was standing alone in the center of the room. The firelight flickered behind him, casting deep shadows against his torso and making his horns look all the more frightening against the amber gleam of his eyes. The vampire’s fingers sparked with dust-like tendrils of wispy smoke.

"Maybe I will take that kiss now." Bastian’s other hand brushed the thick curtain of Luella’s curls back off her shoulders.

The vampire smirked, and with a wave of his shadow-tipped hand, Az disappeared, a growl echoing throughout the room like a harkening of violent promises.

"Az," Luella whispered. But it was no use, the words disappeared into nothing, following the demon back to his wakening body in a cold, damp dungeon where her voice would haunt him, just as he had shared with her.

She jolted, suddenly feeling too vulnerable without Az there to guard her. The bargain mark on her chest seemed to pulse. Bastian could do whatever he wanted, and Luella didn’t stand a chance.

Luella waited for Bastian to move, just as he waited for her.

"I will not kiss you now," Bastian revealed. "Not in your dreams."

"Why?" Luella realized after the small question fell from her lips that it might sound like she had *wanted* him to kiss her. If the red lacing throughout his half-lidded eyes was anything to go by, Bastian thought the same.

"It was fun to mess with Azgorath. It reminded me of…" He shook his head. "Never mind." Bastian pressed a finger against the space between her

brows.

Luella didn’t want to leave yet. Didn’t want to be forced back into a body that didn’t feel welcoming. Into a reality that made her wish she could reside in her mind forever.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "Not yet."

Something in his expression made her think that perhaps he knew all too well the war of thoughts that waged within her mind. Nodding, Bastian relented and removed his touch from between her brows but did not release his hands from her entirely; he guided her by the arm to sit in the leather chair, kneeling between her thighs on the rug.

Bastian smoothed his hands over the hem of her nightgown. "What plagues you?"

Everything, she wanted to say.

A scoff tore from her lips. Did he truly not get it? She had been stolen from her bed, taken from her home, and forced into a life she did not want, with those who did not seem to want her. Just as always.

"I feel…" Luella shook her head to dispel the thoughts swirling in her mind. Bastian’s grip on her grew fierce as he silently urged her on.

It was as Luella met his eyes she said, "I feel like an unanchored vessel here. Drifting in endless waters." She curled her fingers against his shoulders. "I need something to help me from sinking and drowning."

His eyes flicked to hers, and a much-needed breath caught in her lungs, leaving her dizzy.

Those eyes. She was arrested by his gaze.

Maybe having your mind broken into like a locked door wasn’t so bad if he was the one doing the breaking.

"If only you knew," Bastian murmured.

"Knew what?" Luella begged.

He pulled away from her and stood, Luella slow to follow. They were back to the way she knew Bastian liked it, with him towering over her, holding all the power.

Luella stepped back, calves bumping into the chair behind her.

Bastian tsked under his breath and carefully placed his thumb between her brows.

She knew what came next.

But she couldn’t decide if she was relieved to awaken or not.

Bastian’s face lowered to hers. "I’ll see you soon," he breathed over her flushed skin. The words were a warm puff of air from sensual, red lips.

The last thing she saw before the very ground grew unsteady under her feet, was the vampire’s lips mouthing a word.

A word that felt more hazy and surreal than the dream itself.

Precious.

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INTERLUDE

The next few days passed with a torturous slowness.

Luella felt like a shell of herself as she waited for Az to uphold his promise and come for her.

She could not find a moment to escape alone in the night to the library.

And so, along with prophetic poems and dark creatures, the contents of the book remained solely in her mind.

For now.

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FLEEING

It was exactly five nights later that it happened.

The silk sheets twisted around Luella's legs as she tossed and turned throughout the night, restless and scared.

Unsettled, her body thrummed with worry. Her right side burned from how long she had lain on it, wishing for sleep to take her. Luella huffed, twisting to shift to her left. The position put her facing the shut balcony doors, the curtains were pulled back, and she curled her hands under her chin as she watched the night. The many clouds that littered the sky obscured the light of the moon and stars, casting her room in a thick blanket of darkness.

Her fae eyesight strained in the room, picking out shapes and playing with her senses. She swore the robe she had thrown on the back of the chair turned into the gangly shape of a monster for a brief moment… Shadows stretched and yawned, taking the form of nightmares that haunted her.

In a restive fit, she kicked the last of the blankets to the foot of the bed and pulled her knees close to her chest. The winter's chill soothed her skin. It was cold, but perfectly so. Luella sighed as her arms wrapped around her knees, cheek rubbing against the cool pillow.

With her body curled into a tight ball in the sea of rumpled pillows and displaced blankets, Luella counted the few stars she could see peeking through the cover of clouds.

One, two…

Her eyes grew heavy.

Three—

Her breathing evened out.

Four… Five…

And just as the clouds moved to cover the faintest moon rays threatening to dispel the dark, Luella’s eyelids fell closed, and sleep took her.

"Do not move," quietly whispered into her ear.

Her eyes shot open.

A heavy weight was on her hips, a large presence nearly suffocating her as she was forced against the mattress.

"Wha—" Luella tried to say.

A warm palm slapped against her mouth, silencing her.

She had seen this before. Lived it.

Her body was in the present, but her mind was back in Solis, a cloaked figure she would come to know as Tharen straddling her, taking her in the night.

She wouldn’t go through this again.

Luella bucked her hips up as she struggled. It was a male, she knew from his size alone.

Panic threatened to drown her.

She wouldn’t.

Not again.

Please, no.

With how roughly she fought, with how she was focused on survival, Luella didn’t notice how her soul tugged and pulled and pleaded.

The male knocked her clawing hands away, pinning them with ease above her while another hand stayed firm over her mouth. Heavy knees pressed into her thighs, leaving her helpless. Her hair tangled around her as she thrashed and fought, but the fight slowly left her when she realized it was hopeless.

Would she ever learn?

A muffled sob clawed from her throat, stifled by the hand against her mouth.

In the darkness, she could see nothing but shadows.

Luella’s eyes drifted closed momentarily as the male above her waited for the vestiges of her resistance to dwindle.

He leaned his head down. Something sharp poked against her cheek as he muttered close to her ear, "*Settle*."

Her whole body shook. She refused to open her eyes.

"Look at me."

That voice… So familiar.

Lids fluttering open with hesitation and dread, Luella looked.

Amber eyes, dark brown hair curling over tanned skin, curving horns—the sharp thing that had poked her cheek.

All the fight left her in an instant.

"What are you doing?" she asked. But the sound came out muffled from how Az’s hand was still pressed firmly against her lips.

In a fit of indignation, Luella’s tongue poked Az’s palm. His skin tasted as enticing as he was, but he jerked it back before she could taste him further. The look on Az’s face was not as disgusted as she would have thought. No, the heat in his eyes was anything but. Luella swallowed, looking up at him. He loomed over her, and not for the first time in her life, Luella was left helpless to whatever a male wished to do to her.

Az groaned low. "I’ve missed you."

Blinking up at him, Luella could only nod in answer, stunned silent.

He brushed a finger over the high point of her cheek, giving her a soft smile, a brief moment of shared companionship in this treacherous place.

With his hand no longer silencing her, Luella’s words were sharper. "Why are you here?"

Astonishment made her eyes wide as she looked up at him, the gold in her irises like pools of molten sunlight.

"I’ve come for you."

Her bones turned to mush as she lay underneath him.

Finally, she could let someone else take the reigns and care for her instead of being forced to shoulder what felt like the weight of all the realms.

"I didn’t think it would take you this long." Luella tried not to sound sad, but she had *missed him*.

And she didn’t want to sound ungrateful, but she had expected him to understand the brevity of their situation and come for her sooner. Perhaps she had fallen victim to false hopes once more and placed too much on *his* shoulders. Az was a prisoner just as she was; there was only so much he could do, even if Luella liked to think the demon could move mountains with his strength if she so asked.

"I had to make sure it was safe for you. Make sure they were… distracted." Az suddenly pulled away from her, sitting back on his haunches but still keeping her pinned.

Luella pushed against Az’s thigh. Blame it on her fitful sleep the last few days, but she felt tears threaten to spill over, the emotions of finally having him *here*, with her, without the others keeping watch, weighing heavy on her heart.

"Well, then. Let’s go," she said, tone rising with urgency.

Az’s lips tilted up into a half smile, and he ran a finger over her face, tracing patterns into the faint dots of freckles across the bridge of her nose and over her cheeks, the fingers of his other hand toying with hers.

"Don’t cry," he implored. "I’m not worth it."

A wet, tear-stained laugh rose in her chest. "You’ve kept me safe. You’ve upheld your promises. That alone is more than worth it."

And it was. He had done more for her than anyone she had ever met.

Call it foolish—she felt like it most days—and perhaps it was less than a normal being deserved, but Luella found herself clinging to Az like a newborn animal imprinting on the first creature it saw.

Something unrecognizable flitted across Az’s amber eyes. "Angel," he muttered. "I wanted to be this close to you in your dreams, but not with the *vampire* there." He spat the word like a curse, like Bastian was in the corner of this room, haunting them just as he did in her dreams.

Lips pressed to the crown of Luella’s hair, butterfly kisses along her temples as he shushed her crying. One of her still-shaking hands came up to brush against the point of one of his horns.

"I’m sorry, angel. Forgive me," he mumbled against her brow.

"You’re forgiven. Always."

She knew he was apologizing for more than taking a few measly days before coming for her.

Az was apologizing for things he had no part in.

All of it. The dungeons, Luella being robbed of her old life, the cruelty inflicted upon her. He shouldn’t have to, not when he had been the nicest of them all.

The gentle touch of his hands on her shoulders urged her to sit up, and Luella felt warmth on her skin from how they were situated. His legs were still pinning her to the bed. He was practically sitting on her thighs. The thin strap of her nightgown slipped down her shoulder, and amber eyes tracked the motion. Az righted the strap for her before extricating himself, limbs untangling with hers as he stood by the bed, a palm outstretched.

"Come," he urged.

Her hand slipped into his, and Luella was pulled from the cocoon of her bed. She stood silently in the middle of the room, watching as Az eyed the robe she had draped over the back of her dressing chair. "Do you have anything warmer?"

"Yes." Luella padded to the wardrobe and opened it, revealing her collection of various gowns and coverings.

Az huffed. "They’ve treated you like some doll."

"I am one of the King’s possessions, after all," Luella said bitterly. "I’m told he likes to care for his *things*."

"You are not a *thing*, Luella," Az urged, standing behind her as they faced the contents of the wardrobe.

She settled into him, her back pressed against his chest as he flipped through the thicker clothes on the far side.

"It’s hard to think otherwise when everything has been stolen from me."

Az’s dark curls tickled against her skin as his cheek pressed against hers. "You are a prisoner to the King, but don’t you see." He grasped her chin, forcing her to look at the beautiful gowns hanging in the dark wardrobe, all the jeweled necklaces and hair ornaments displayed along the lower shelves. "You are important. You just haven’t realized it yet. And I pity them all when you come to understand just how much power you hold."

Luella shook her head. She held no power, and she never would. The demon thought too highly of her.

She silently pulled a dark, thick cloak from within the wardrobe and held it up. The fabric was soft under her hands, yet thick enough to ward away the touch of winter. "Will this do?"

"Yes," Az replied. "But you will need something warmer underneath." Arms caged her in as he reached into the wardrobe, pulling a simple black, fitted blouse and matching trousers from within. She didn’t even realize the King had supplied her with pants. Az pressed the folded clothes into her hands, nudging her to face him. "Change and hurry."

Luella slipped behind the opened doors of the wardrobe, not wanting to part from Az any longer than she had to. The door created a tiny, makeshift partition where it opened to touch the wall. It would have to do.

"Don’t look," she said, hand curling around the edge of the door as she peeked out at him.

Az gave a tiny shake of his head and turned around. She didn’t miss the faint tapping of a finger against his thigh in agitation. The demon was on edge. And so was she.

Luella dropped the thin nightgown, the straps slipping from her shoulders as the silk slid down her body and pooled at her feet. It was quick work donning the dark blouse and lacing the ties in the front to support her breasts. The pants were snug against her thighs and hips; she had never worn anything so form-fitting.

Stepping out of the makeshift dressing nook, Luella announced, "All done."

Az turned and took her in, jaw hardening as his amber eyes tracked down to how tightly the pants stuck to her frame. Nervous under his scrutiny, Luella snapped the thick material with a finger, only for it to cling back to her thigh.

Clearing his throat, the demon held up a pair of leather boots. Luella reached for them, but Az held them back, tutting under his breath.

"Allow me."

And then he knelt before her, hands resting on her thighs, fingers digging into her pants. Her breath hitched. He traced a hand down the length of her leg before gently taking her foot in his grasp. Her hands shot to his shoulders to steady herself, and he let out a grumble of appreciation.

Luella was quiet as he put the boots on her, quickly doing the laces and tucking the hem of her pants inside them. When Az was finished, he stood slowly, gaze never leaving hers as his head passed her thighs, her stomach, and then her he was at his full height, towering over her, and she was the one forced to crane her head up.

Luella was the first to look away.

With shaking hands, she wrapped the cloak around her, clipping it securely around her neck.

"Shall we go?" she asked, voice a tremulous thing, breaking up the hushed tension that had befallen them.

Az cast a cursory glance around the room, and Luella couldn’t help but mimic the motion. The night air coming through the tiny crack in the window against the far wall rustled the sheer drapes. The image faintly looked like hands clawing from the other side, desperate to get in, just as she was desperate to get out.

"Let’s go." In the silence of the night, Az’s reply was grim, doing nothing to disquiet the unease churning in the hollows of her soul.

This place had caged her. And she wasn’t sorry to leave it.

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CAVERNOUS BLUE

"Are you certain?"

The question was whispered into the crown of Luella’s hair, Az keeping her tucked into his side as they skirted the edges of the shadowed halls of the castle.

"Yes."

The demon’s hand was on her shoulder, steering her the way he saw fit.

A puff of air against the side of her cheek where the hood of her dark cloak fell back slightly as she looked up at him. "I’m positive," Luella affirmed.

"The tunnels are no place for you," Az hissed but led her on all the while.

They had been dancing this choreography of stubborn wills since they left her room.

Az hated the idea of taking her through the underground tunnels, but she knew the risk.

Death here, or death there.

At least with Az, she would have a greater chance. Demons did well underground, after all. The Below was one great underground realm.

She fixed her hood, pulling it back up to obscure her golden hair; it would stand out starkly in the darkened halls. Az clutched her hand. Her body practically melded to his as they rounded the corner to head down the

lonesome hall leading to the library. The doors stood up ahead, looming. Waiting.

Just as Az tugged her from behind their hidden spot, flush against the wall, and down the hall, the sound of footsteps made them pause. Az jerked back into Luella, making her stumble. She righted herself with a hand lodged against his broad back.

"Quiet," he warned.

She tried to stifle the sound of her breathing. Her forehead fell to his back, lips pressed against it to suppress her shaking breaths.

When the footfalls grew louder, coming toward them, Az stepped back, Luella following suit. he turned, then crowded her back, back, *back* the way they had come, stopping at a tiny nook carved into the wall. It held no windows, and a golden sconce was fixed to the wall, blessedly unlit, keeping the space obscured in shadows and darkness.

He pulled her into the tight space, their chests flush against each other as he half-hid her body with his, making sure he would be the first to fall if they were discovered. Luella pressed her face into his chest as they waited for whoever it was to pass by.

Please, let them pass by.

Freedom was so close she could taste it, feel it at the tips of her fingers.

And just when Luella thought it would all be over—the footsteps would discover them and send her back to the cold underground to rot for the rest of her days—they retreated, footfalls growing fainter and fainter as whoever it was left back down the halls.

She couldn’t understand it, but she wouldn’t dwell on it too much. Luck had never been a friend of hers, but perhaps, just this once, it would sway in her favor.

Az notched a finger under her chin, silently asking her if she was okay; she could only give a soft shake of her head in response. The tremble to her fingers and the quiver to her lip told the truth, however.

Urging her forward, Az mouthed, *Come*.

The demon led the way, Luella staying in his shadow as they quickly trekked down the remainder of the hall. She moved around him to place a hand on the doorknob, and without giving into the hesitation that welled up within her, making her wish she could crawl under her covers and never come out, she pushed the door open.

"This way," Luella whispered, turning her head to beckon Az as her booted feet tiptoed on the floors of the library.

Now, it was her turn to lead the way.

Water trickled into the fountain, a faint murmur of rippling droplets, but otherwise, it was silent. The sound of their shared breaths and footfalls made her lips curl in unease, searching in the moonlit cavernous space for the flash of a golden crown or white hair pulled back with thick braids.

She couldn’t forget the last time she had been in here—something Luella conveniently left out when she had shared her plans with Az…

Fingers skimming over the spines of books, Luella expertly walked the maze of towering shelves. Just as she rounded a corner leading to the small alcove, she sent up a small prayer to the gods that Nyx wouldn’t be there. Her plan was the furthest thing from foolproof, but the sprite was the only part Luella felt uncertain about. Nyx knew her as Lu and held allegiance to Tharen; all it would take is one little wrongly said word, and everything would go up in smoke.

The air grew more and more stale the further they went into the depths of the library. The dripping of the small pool grew faint with every step they took away from the main space. Az stayed at her back like a sentinel—it reminded Luella so much of Graves she could have sworn the two were secretly in league.

She stayed on her tiptoes, silently padding along the stone floor, but her heartbeat was in tune with the sound of her harsh breaths, echoed by Az behind her. Just as she prepared to round the corner, she paused and held her breath, so desperate this would all work out.

Fingers reached behind her to intertwine with Az’s hand, and he latched onto her in an act just as searching and desperate as she felt inside. Az’s pinky hooked around hers, a thumb stroking the back of her hand, and with that anchoring touch, Luella walked forward.

She and Az stepped into the alcove, the demon at her back having to stoop and bend slightly to fit. A boot splashed into a small pool of water underfoot, but she paid it no mind, golden eyes surreptitiously looking about the space for a glimpse of the tiny, verdant-hued sprite.

It was quiet and still in the alcove, untouched as far as she could tell from the last time she had been here. Salty air wafted from the hidden cave

entrance tucked behind the tallest shelf, and Luella shivered, fingers clenching in Az’s grip as she resisted the urge to stumble back into him.

The demon braced a hand on her shoulder, head lowering as he murmured, "It’s here?"

"Yes," she breathed. It all seemed far more terrifying now that she knew she would have to enter the midst of inky darkness. She lifted a shaking finger and pointed toward the shelf. "Behind that."

Even when she had been alone here, it hadn’t seemed quite so daunting, but unease rippled through her like the near-constant breezes floating about. A curl brushing her cheek blew as a firmer gust swirled.

"There’s an exit," Luella managed, looking toward Az. "Right?"

He pulled her behind him, notching his body in front of her as he took short steps to the shelf, rounding the corner to where it was half-hidden. He raised a hand as he walked, stilling her from following further. She had the intrinsic urge to jump forward and pull him back where it was safe, fearful that reaching, clawing hands might snake from within and drag him down, *down*, where she may never see him again.

She could not let him face it alone.

Luella followed, leaving the flimsy protection of the shelf as she came to stand right before the cave entrance.

It was a hollow escape, beckoning with finger-like shadows and the promise of salty, pine-tinged freedom.

She watched the back of his head, fingers fluttering to her lips in her fear. Brown curls blew back as Az stuck his head in the crevice, a shoulder knocking against the stone wall. He wouldn’t fit like that. He would have to go sideways, and even then, it was a gamble if the tunnels would let up and grow larger as they walked on.

"Yes, there must be," Az finally announced. He turned to face her, and she swallowed down her fear of him having his back to the tunnels. A few long strides, and he was before her, hands on her shoulders as he lowered his face right before hers.

Luella was entranced by the exact shade of his eyes.

"Listen to me, Lu, and listen well. If we go, and I see there is no clear way out, we come back. I will not risk you."

Luella nodded. He cared for her. And she would be bereft once he realized she was too much trouble and left.

"Say it. I need to hear you say you agree, or this"—he waved a hand behind him—"will not happen."

"I understand," Luella croaked. She cleared her throat, eyes shifting down to his chest and the little clasp that held his cloak together.

He tilted her face up with a finger underneath her chin. "I… care for you, Lu. And I will not have you harmed because of me." She melted at the softness in his gaze, features smoothing out to an inviting warmth, wholly at odds with the persona he showed in court, a hardened demon capable of the most vicious violence. But not with her. Never with her.

"I understand," she said instead of sharing what she really felt. She cared for him, too, and she didn’t want him to leave her. That she felt like it was imminent, no matter how dearly she tried to hold on to these little stolen moments.

One day, he would grow tired of her. Find out that she was as burdensome as her parents and tutors told her she was. Luella feared that when that day came, she would already be a shell, shriveled up inside and unable to mourn. She was mourning him now, and he hadn’t even left her yet.

He gave her a soft smile. In the dim of the alcove, the shadows danced off his tanned skin, making the curving shapes of his horn turn into long points across his cheeks.

Az didn’t speak, merely offered a palm, patient, as he let her make the first move. The entrance behind him seemed to stretch, going so far and so deep that Luella couldn’t even fathom where it ended. Where it went.

But she would find out.

Placing her palm in his, Az pulled Luella to him, both of them facing the caves and whatever awaited them there.

Her attention caught on the rough stone under her boots and the moss-covered bricks of the walls. Then, she remembered. Gaze falling to the smallest little corner, tucked so far back between the shelf and the wall—a haphazardly placed stone brick. So tiny and insignificant that one would never realize what lay nestled behind it.

Luella pulled away from Az, and before he could berate her, she dove back toward the place where she had hidden the book, clothed knees thudding on the rough stone as her hands dug for purchase against the stone.

"Lu," Az hissed.

She did not look at him, solely focused on what lay behind the brick. With a huff, she pulled it free. The book was still there, and she reached for it with cold fingers, tucking it in the folds of her cloak.

Standing, Luella steeled herself as she righted her cloak, making sure the book was safe. "I'll explain," she told Az. "Later. I promise."

He gave an imperceptible shake of his head, dark brow furrowed. But it seemed he was satisfied by her promise. For now.

Once more, the demon offered the captive Princess a hand, and she took it with glee.

A breath blown between pale and anxiously bitten lips, and Luella followed Az as they entered the depths of darkness, forgotten stories held within the long-lost tunnels, but within her grasp, a book that contained just as many arcane secrets.

The walls were closing in around her.

Luella's breath came short and quick in her chest; her head was light and fuzzy as she single-mindedly focused on keeping one foot in front of the other.

One step.

Then the next…

Grounding herself with the slide of the roughened cave walls against her shoulders, the sound of her boots on the ground, the feel of Az's fingers wrapping around hers as he led her down, down, down, winding around, this way and that, while they followed the maze of the cavernous depths.

Thankfully, it was only one narrow passageway. Otherwise, Luella feared they would become helplessly lost here.

I'm okay, I'm okay, she repeated like a mantra in her head.

But it didn't help much.

Fingers squeezed against hers. "Are you alright back there?"

"I'm fine," Luella mumbled, her voice bouncing off the walls.

It was dark. So dark every time she blinked or closed her eyes, it felt the same as keeping them open. It made no difference either way…

Even with her fae senses—inadequate as they may be—she felt like she had died and was hovering somewhere between, stuck in the darkness. With

his demon eyesight, Az prowled like a feline, easily finding his way and leading her onward. She didn’t notice him stumble once, even though she had tripped over rocks or rough ground on multiple occasions.

Luella’s booted foot hit a particular jagged rock, and she fell into Az’s back, chin knocking against him.

The demon stopped, reaching back to feel her. He couldn’t turn fully, and from the way his back felt contorted under her hands, he was stooped over in what must have been an uncomfortable position, but as his arm twisted to pat along her shoulder, she found it was enough.

"It’s okay. Keep going," Luella urged.

With every step they took, the scent of salt air and the tangy freshness of pine trees grew stronger. They were getting closer. She just had to bear it a little while longer.

Luella liked to think anything was bearable for just a short amount of time, and that time grew and grew with every passing second, and before long, it was over.

"Almost, Lu. Hold on for me," Az said, hand giving a small pat to her shoulder before his touch left her altogether. "Grab my cloak, and do not let go."

Luella did, fingers fisting into his cloak so tightly she imagined it would nearly rip from her fear-propelled grasping.

The walls lowered, her head suddenly brushing the ceiling, and Luella was forced to bend, huddled up as close to Az as she could manage. She heard him let out a deep sigh of discomfort. If it was hard for Luella to bend, she could only imagine how he must have felt trapped as he folded himself smaller.

A sharp curve, the air growing rich with the scent of stale earth and cool rock. It smelled like water, strangely inviting to her.

Luella would give anything to sink her sore feet into a bath.

"Az," she called. "Do you see anything?"

He rumbled, "It looks like it opens up ahead."

"Good." She nearly sighed with relief.

Tiny pinpricks of light broke up the everlasting dark, and slowly but surely, Luella started to see again.

It was a blue-tinged light, making everything shimmer like the evening sky. Rays quietly illuminated the dark stone walls around her.

Everywhere was grey and brown, like boring earth. Jagged pieces interspersed with smooth walls. The ceiling was low, and her back hurt from bending, but she peered around Az’s arms, seeing how it let up ahead, growing larger and larger with every footstep they took. She straightened, relieved to stand normally.

Az stumbled out first, Luella following with her hands still gripping the back of his cloak to keep them connected.

"Wow," Luella breathed out as she took in the space.

It was a cavern.

Stalagmites stood tall from the ground, groups collected near the walls, while stalactites fell in cascading points from the ceilings. The air was musty, but it wasn’t unpleasant. It smelled of clean mud and damp earth, and the air rippled with chill.

But that wasn’t what made her so awed.

Blue orbs of light stuck to the ceilings, a constant glow that cast everything in beautiful aquamarine shadows. A small pool of water was at the very center, reflecting the glow from the ceiling. The two shades bounced off of each other, and it was resplendent.

"What is this?" Luella asked, hands held up in front of her as if waiting to catch the blue orbs.

Az turned to face her, saying, "I’ve never seen anything like it before." The blue light made his tanned skin appear pale, a faint aqua shimmer in his amber eyes as he looked from the water pool back to her.

Ripples of the water reflected on the walls, and Luella brushed a hand over it. "Beautiful," she commented.

"Very," Luella heard Az say with a low tone—only she looked at him to find that his attention was on her and not the hidden beauties of the cavern.

She blushed, wondering if he could see the faint pink on her cheeks in this world of blue they had stepped into.

Spinning in a slow circle, Luella simply took it all in. The most free she had felt in ages, underground and tucked away.

She came to a stop in front of the demon; he watched her with a soft smile, the shadows of the water moving against his face.

Luella pushed back her hood, freeing her golden curls from where she had tucked them inside the cloak. Her head tilted back as she breathed in the damp air.

"Lu," Az chastised.

"We’re the only ones here," she said, rising on her tiptoes to push his hood back. Before she drew away, she playfully tugged on a dark strand of his hair, an impish smile on her lips.

This place made her feel like when she was young, the world at her fingertips as she pretended to be on an adventure.

As much as she would love to stay, curl up by the pool of water, and take a nap, she knew they could not. The twinge of salt in the air did not come from this cave but from somewhere *other*.

Somewhere outside.

The main cavern branched off into four different pathways, not including the one behind them they had exited.

Luella eyed the paths of darkness. All identical.

Az grumbled. "Remember what I said, Lu? The first possibility of danger, and we go back. I don’t care if I have to take you right back to your bed. If King Vale finds out… I’ll take the blame." He laughed bitterly. "I don’t care what they do to me. Let them try to kill me. They’ve been trying for years and haven’t succeeded yet."

"I care about you. I care what they do to you."

Az firmly stroked a hand down her hair, gripping her nape as he forced her to look at him. He appeared to want to say something, mouth opening as he thought, but the demon merely sighed and pulled away from her, giving a soft shake of his head as if to dispel the thought that had threatened to fall from his lips.

He faced the darkness of the far wall, the four paths that led who knew where. "Fuck," he cursed. A hand raked through his hair, making the soft curls stand up in disarray. He looked at her, dark brow arching in question. "We only try once," he reminded her. "Which way?"

Luella bit her lip. Her boots echoed on the stone floor as she walked toward the tunnels, careful to keep her distance. The air seemed to vibrate around her, faint humming seeped out from the depths.

Cool air misted across her face as she took time standing before each of the four paths. All the while, she never thought to question why Az had asked *her*.

Her eyes fluttered shut, head tilting back as she allowed herself to just *feel*.

It was from the very last tunnel that Luella felt a tug, pulling her down and up and across, winding around—all to lead outside.

She could almost feel the grass under her bare feet, smell pine and cedar, and hear the leaves rustle in the breeze. *Feel* the moonlight against her skin.

A finger pointed toward the tunnel, and Luella opened her eyes.

"This way," she said. Her voice sounded odd to her own ears, faint and thready as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep.

Az did not reject her conclusion and did not ask how she felt drawn to that particular tunnel. And Luella did not question it, either.

She was beyond understanding what kind of old magic had befallen her in this place. Ripped from her home where she was made to believe she was nothing—had nothing—only to feel a tingle in her soul where her magic would have resided.

In the library, leading her to that small, forgotten place and in the tunnels. Luella felt that same tug when she first met Az, an almost imperceptible nudge from her soul, as if whispering, *go to him.*

Luella had never opened up so quickly to anyone before, but it was like their souls had known each other. Been crafted from the very same fabric.

She tried to ignore how that same call seemed to echo when she was in the presence of the *others*…

Az stepped around her, turning to offer a hand. The blue light of the cavern made him look ethereal. She wished they could stay.

His palm was warm under hers as their fingers intertwined, the demon leading her onward.

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THE SILVA NOCTIS

"No."

Fear gripped Luella, making her whole body quiver and shake.

"No, no, no." She stumbled back into Az, who was already in a protective stance, feet apart as his hands were curled into tight fists.

"Behind me," Az barked. His voice brooked no argument, and Luella obeyed without a word.

The darkness of the tunnel opening was behind her, foreboding and winding. But before her? An even worse sight.

Muted green all around. The scent of pine and rich forest surrounded her. Breeze ticked her face and rustled the curls of her hair and the fabric of her cloak. The same scents and feels that had washed over her, leading her down that tunnel as she and Az had taken the short and sharply curved upward path—all to come out where they were currently standing…

The Silva Noctis.

She had only read stories of the place. A so-called pocket realm that had entrances all over. Luella didn't think she had ever heard someone enter and leave with their life. It was that thought that made all the blood pool to her feet, face leeched of color as her golden eyes took in the sights before her.

The sky was gone.

Luella could barely see anything. Only the faintest hints of the moon, stars, and clouds above. The leaves of the trees around them were dark green, sick, and ripe with shadows. Outside the cave entrance, the ground

was thick with pine needles, interspersed with a few patches of deadened grass.

If it weren’t for the never-ending cover of darkness from the thick foliage above—the towering trees curving inward to blot out all the skies—Luella would have thought it any old forest. But she knew better.

And so did Az.

There were no woodland creatures chittering in the distance. No humming of birds or rustling in the leaves from fawn or small creatures of prey.

It was quiet. Too quiet. And Luella felt like she might throw up.

Her voice shook as she asked, "What do we do?"

Az did not look at her. "Survive."

Her hands curled around the fabric of his cloak, the material rough under her hands. Grounding. She hated to give her back to the cave behind them; she still felt as though something sinister might crawl from the depths.

The shadows buzzed around them.

"What of t-the… wraiths?" Luella’s voice was quiet, like the shadowed monsters may hear her and materialize in front of her eyes.

"I’ll deal with them."

"D-deal with them?" Luella choked out incredulously. "I know you are strong, Az, but even you have limits."

He turned then, gripping her shoulders. His amber eyes were wild, hair tousled from the soft breeze. She nearly stumbled back away from him but resisted the urge, biting down on her bottom lip hard to make herself focus. Az was not a threat. Not to her.

"What did I promise you?" He looked deeply into her eyes, an untamed thing here in the forest.

Luella realized this was the first time she had seen the demon out in the wild, away from the castle. And here, he was just as feral as she would have thought a demon to be. This was the creature her tutors had spoken of in stories to warn her away from the shadows—too bad Luella willingly stepped into their midst.

Az pulled down the neckline of his shirt, stretching the cloak from where it was clasped with a button. She eyed the mark of his vow etched on his chest—a tiny, red circle imprinted over his heart. Evidence of his devotion to her.

Tremors wracked her frame, and her brows curved low over her eyes as she pleaded with him without words to keep her safe. A wave of night air swept into the beginnings of the cave, making odd wooshing sounds against the rock face stretching high above, blending into the mountain that held the tunnel entrance they had walked.

She didn’t want to think of what creatures would call these caves their home. Her head turned as she looked behind her, but Az kept a firm palm on her cheek, directing her to look back at him.

"Eyes on me," he said softly.

She tried, she did. But this place… It was like her worst nightmares, every little bedtime story turned dark with too many nights left alone. Always alone.

Shadows crested along the pine-littered ground, the tall trunks and scraggly limbs stretching along the forest floor. Luella couldn’t tell what was a real shadow and what could have been a wraith.

From the picture books she had seen, wraiths were made of shadow itself, dark creatures that blended with the hidden places, nestled deep in corners. You didn’t know they were upon you until it was too late. They hungered for power and sucked it from you until you were nothing but a husk.

Az stroked his thumb over her cheekbone, and she leaned into the touch, eyes closing from the scant traces of comfort.

"What did I promise you?" the demon repeated, voice low in memory of their time together in the dungeons.

Hands curled between iron bars, softly murmured lullabies, a vow made in blood—it made her want to hold dearly on to the terrible experience. The only bright spot in a world of dark.

"You would keep me safe," Luella mumbled against his palm.

Tiredness made her lids heavy, and she leaned her weight against him.

Az nodded, hand moving to stroke over the crown of her head. "Exactly. I promised. I *vowed*," he emphasized. "In blood. And I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"But how?" Panic made her words come out thick.

Az’s face came closer, their lips a mere breath apart as he whispered over her skin, the words like a secret, "I’ve been here before."

Her face scrunched up in confusion, and Az gave a soft chuckle at the sight.

"How?"

It didn’t make any sense. Luella had never heard of someone making it out of the Silva Noctis alive.

The demon’s lips turned up into a half smile. "I have my ways." He pulled back from her, turning to face the forest.

It was dark, even for what must have been the middle of the night, and Luella wondered if the daylight would be able to break through the thick cover of trees above.

Would she even live to find out?

"What are we going to do?" Luella asked.

Would they go back through the tunnels? Would she crawl back into her bed and pretend none of this had ever happened?

Or would they venture forward?

"Stay," Az simply replied.

He wasn’t making any sense. What did he mean, *stay*?

Luella didn’t care what happened to her, not anymore. But she would not risk Az.

"I can’t let you do this for me." She pressed a hand against his back, silently wishing he would turn and tell her it would all be okay, that she could go back to her gilded cage and spend the rest of her days as a pretty prisoner—the war prize of the cruel King.

A hand gripped hers, but he still did not turn and face her, intensely focused on the forest before them. "You don’t *let* me do anything. The Silva Noctis is not as deadly as the stories make it to be. We can make it through. We will. We can use this to our advantage, Lu." Her fingers curled in his shirt as he spoke. "This is a… good thing." His voice was hesitant like he was trying to convince himself as well as her. But Luella wouldn’t be swayed by his words.

The tales of the wraiths and monstrous beasts that prowled in the night kept her vigilant. Kept her fearful. Sometimes, fear was a good thing. It made you wise. Wary.

"The Silva Noctis has entrances all around. We just have to find them. And when we do"—his stance was proud as he faced the shadowed expanse of trees—"we will be free."

Freedom… Was it still a possibility?

Luella peered around his shoulder. The forest was menacing, no matter how the demon painted it to be a saving grace. "How do we get out?"

"Keep walking. Stay vigilant." His words were not reassuring.

Az backed up, crowding Luella deeper into the cave. The stone wall brushed against her spine. He turned and placed his hands on either side of her head, caging her in completely.

"First step is to find shelter." He grinned, teeth glinting in the dark. "Lucky for us, we're in the best shelter we could find."

"The cave?" Luella hedged.

He nodded, jerking his head to gesture to the forest behind him. Luella couldn't see from how he was wrapped around her, caging her in. She was wholly reliant on him. His eyes. His touch.

Az held up a finger. "Shelter is always the number one priority. Then water." He ticked off on another finger before holding up the third and final. "Then food. Remember that."

The demon seemed to be in his element. A manner of protective brutality had overtaken him. Wild and untamed, just like a primal beast. Luella wasn't sure how he felt so calm about being in the Silva Noctis—when had he even been here before and lived to tell the tale?—but she was grateful she wasn't alone. That she had someone to rely on.

Luella placed a hand on Az's lower stomach, fingers spanning out as she peered up at him. With a soft nod of her head, she relented, agreeing to the demon's plans.

They had come this far, after all.

He seemed pleased by her willingness, a sharp heat radiating from his eyes as he pulled away with reluctance.

"It's cold," Az commented, noting how Luella shivered under her thick cloak and dark clothes. "We need fire. Warmth." He looked at the cavernous darkness around them. The tunnel they had used as an entrance into the forest was to her side, but deeper in the cavern, a few other tunnels snaked off—some short, some narrow, but all leaving her with a sense of foreboding at what they might hold.

Az prowled to a short hole in the depths of the cave. Even *she* would have to crawl to enter…

Crouching down, he scanned the depths. Luella awaited to hear his verdict. She knew what had drawn him to the small entrance, though. It looked safe, innocuous. A singular, small entrance meant it would be hard for someone to enter—but hard for them to exit quickly if they needed to.

"The ceiling opens up further back. Not too deep, either." Az stood. "We sleep here for now." Amber eyes glinted in the dark as the demon said, "It’s almost daylight. A few hours at best. I can’t leave you here without a weapon…" He was rambling. Luella wasn’t sure if it was the nerves or something else, but she hadn’t seen him so out of sorts.

Luella agreed with his final point with a fervent shake of her head. "We stay together," she demanded. Before adding on a meek, "Please."

"Always," Az vowed. He held out a hand, an action that was quickly becoming a *thing* between them—the demon seemed to have caught onto the fact that Luella often needed prodding and urging, more than just words, but a coaxing touch.

He pointed at her, then at the ground. "Stay."

She would not.

"No," Luella scoffed. She trailed after the demon like a little, lost thing, "You just said we would stay together." Her tone was petulant.

Az sighed, spinning to gather up her hand and tug her along. They didn’t go far, just to the very outskirts of the cave’s entrance, where the ground was ripe with fallen pine needles and browned leaves, little twigs, and a few pebbles. Her eyes strained as she adjusted to the dark, the light from the moon barely came through the canopy over them. She was careful to stick close to Az.

"We need kindling for a fire." The demon bent and scooped up a handful of brown pine needles. A few pinecones were scattered nearby, and she kicked one with her foot.

A gust of wind rattled the treetops, blowing the thick canopy overhead. It made a soft wooshing noise, and she shivered, snuggling down into her cloak deeper. Luella was surprised there wasn’t snow on the ground, but she could spot no traces of it—no mushy and melted icy or damp spots of white clumps.

Was it even winter in this forest? She wasn’t sure how the Silva Noctis operated. Did it follow the normal seasonal patterns? From the chill in the air, it certainly felt like winter, that was for sure.

She bent and picked up a few of the pinecones; the edges were sharp against her palm, and she stroked a thumb over it, the pointed edges digging into her flesh. Luella had never seen a real one before, but she had seen drawings.

"Careful," Az warned.

Luella jolted, nearly dropping it. She held it out in her palm, asking, "Will this help for a fire?"

She hated feeling useless and was loathe to admit she didn’t have the first clue about what was good kindling for a fire. She had never had any survival training…

The demon gave a short nod, quickly gathering up a few more dry pieces of grass to stuff in the pockets of his cloak. Hands now free, he brushed his palms off with a quick slap.

He took in the way she was standing, awaiting his instructions as the few brittle pinecones were clutched in her grasp. "Good," Az praised, taking the few pinecones from her and adding them to his pocket.

Her cheeks warmed as she looked down, following in his footsteps as they walked back into the cave. The air was even chillier here. Luella shuddered.

He eyed her drooped shoulders, fatigue making her slump. "Let’s sleep. We’ll plan more when you awaken."

Az pulled her down onto the stone ground, crouching behind her as he urged her to crawl inside the small entrance, a palm precariously low on her back, fingers skimming the curve of her hip and *lower* as he nudged her on. She shivered, crawling quickly, palms digging into small and sharp rocks as she fumbled through the dark.

It was a shallow cave, a little bubble untouched by the shadowed forest awaiting them. The ceiling grew to a medium height, and Luella slowly rose to her knees, careful to keep a hand above her so she wouldn’t hit her head. It was tall enough that she could stand, but Az wouldn’t be able to. Small enough, she felt safe… There were no monsters hidden here.

Something poked her calf, Az skimming a finger over her leg as he belly-crawled into their hollowed shelter. "Okay?" he asked.

"Y-yes." She scooted away, back hitting the curved wall as she made room for Az. Knees pulled up to her chest as her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Her fae eyesight allowed her to make out soft shapes, little impressions of a hand or leg as he shifted, putting himself between her and the only entrance to their hideaway—always keeping her safe.

With both of them in the small space, the air quickly grew warm with their shared breaths, the demon’s body heat bringing a rosy flush to her skin.

Luella rested a hand on what she thought was Az's thigh, patting along before scooting as close to him as she dared.

"What now?" Her breathing was quiet, and she felt strangely flustered.

"Fire." Az cleared his throat. His voice was deep, and it made her heart palpitate in her chest as the sound washed over her. "Move back a bit, Lu."

Luella scooted back, body buzzing from how aware she was of him in this space. She squinted in the dark as Az bent, expertly piling the kindling they had gathered on the stone floor closest to the opening they had crawled through.

Something clicked sharply as she heard him blow out short puffs of air. A few more tries, rough clacking noises, and blown breaths before there was a sudden crackle as fire sparked.

Tiny orange embers were born, and as Az fanned a hand over them, slowly adding a few pieces of fallen leaves, it grew and grew, becoming a small and contained fire.

The light illuminated the space, casting golden shadows on Az's skin as he shifted back. With the extra light, she could finally see well, and Luella took in the small cave they were nestled in. It was all grey, with smooth walls and a few rocks further inside. The warmth from the fire quickly made the space near stifling—but not quite, it was teetering between too much and not enough.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and watched as Az sat back, shimmying down to recline against the wall, careful to keep away from the fire. With an outstretched arm, he beckoned her to come, and she folded into his side.

This space was intimate. It reminded her of the dungeons, but so much different. No iron bars were separating them, forcing them apart as they slept. Luella could curl up as close to Az as she wished, and no one or nothing could stand in her way.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist and tucked her unto his side, a hand gripping her thigh and swinging it over his hip. He was so much bigger than her. She felt so safe here with him, in this golden-hued bubble. Luella's crooked leg hitched around Az's waist, while her hand wrapped around his chest, and she rested her cheek on his shoulder. He was warm under her, juxtaposed to the coolness of the rock at her spine. It was cozy, reminding her of coming in from a snowstorm and curling up by the fire, still chilled skin quickly becoming thawed.

Az stroked a hand down her hair, and her eyes fluttered shut.

"You sleep. Or try to," Az muttered. His voice was a gruff softness, and if she stilled for long enough, her mind almost tricked her into believing she was right back in the dungeons, hearing words whispered in the iron dark.

Luella nosed along his chest as she breathed in his inviting scent of warmth and burnt sugar. Her fingertips played with the dip of his collarbone and tugged on the neckline of his shirt, searching for any bare skin she could find. "What about you?"

"I'll keep watch, angel. Don't worry about me."

She hated to hear it. Hated that he put her first. But her eyes were so heavy she could barely hold them open. Combined with his heat, wrapped around her and his scent, coating her with the richness of melted chocolate…

Luella never even realized her eyes fell closed, too caught up in him. She shifted slightly, trying to get comfortable. The spine of the stolen book poked her ribs, and she ignored it, not wanting to disrupt this soft, quiet escape they had carved for themselves within the depths of the stone.

Az settled a hand on her shoulder to still her. He was used to her fitful sleeping habits. Luella tended to shift this way and that to get comfortable before sleeping.

A hand snaked into her cloak, and she touched the book cover where it was tucked closely to her side.

Tomorrow, she thought.

Luella would show Az tomorrow and see where this forest of darkness and shadow would lead them.

Luella was so warm and comfortable, even though the ground was hard under her. She stretched out her feet, toes crinkling in her boots as her face nuzzled into a solid chest.

She cracked open an eye.

"Morning," Az grumbled. His chest vibrated under her, and she relished in the sensation of their intertwined bodies. This was what she had been robbed of in the dungeons—for her whole life, really. Physical touch. She had been *starved* for it.

And now that she had it, she never wanted to let it go.

"Good morning," she whispered against his chest, shyness gripping her with a sudden intensity.

Their softly spoken words and the way they were pressed together evinced an intimacy that made her feel alight with sparks. Even though exhaustion threatened to pull her back under. All she wanted was to stay curled up with him and relish in the feel of his body against hers, the rise and fall of his chest under her cheek, and the warmth that blanketed them both in this small sanctuary.

The faintest cracks of green-tinted light filtered in from the low entrance of the cave, barely enough to illuminate the entire space with how closed off it was. But it was enough for Luella to see all of Az.

The fire was out, no longer flickering on his other side. She could just barely see how he was covering the entrance entirely with his large body, reclining against the hard stone wall, yet constantly looking for threats. He was on edge, coiled like a snake. Even as his eyes remained soft when he stared down at her.

Luella didn’t know what had awakened her.

"Is everything… okay?" She placed a cold palm on his chest, fingertips digging into his hard muscles.

Az was tense underneath her. "We should move," he said, arm flexing around her waist.

She sat up slowly, notching a hand under her. Her eyes were still heavy with weariness. The little sleep she got didn’t seem to help, especially with how hard the ground was. Her mouth was dry, and there was a slight emptiness in her stomach, a feeling she had grown used to but uncomfortable, all the same.

Shifting to a crouch, Luella looked to Az for their next move.

With the faint light, she watched as he moved to lay on his stomach. "Follow quietly," he commanded before slowly crawling out the same way he had entered.

She followed suit, biting down on her lower lip to quiet her breathing. Az stayed in front of her to keep her hidden as she rose to stand outside of their hideaway.

Patting the side of her cloak, she made sure the book was still there. Questions bubbled up, but she refused to give in. Not right now. Not when Az looked so on edge.

Not when the Silva Noctis beckoned.

The late morning light battled against the thick foliage of the forest, tiny traces creeping in through cracks and crevices, but it was still dark.

The glowing sun above pierced through a particularly thick cropping of leaves. It was high in the sky, inching closer and closer to the day’s peak. She had slept later than she had wanted.

Why had Az let her rest so long?

She fisted her hands in the back of his cloak, and he sensed her confusion, wrapping a hand around her wrist to tug her to his side. "It’ll be okay," he whispered. "But we need to leave."

He quickly crouched and pulled a few pieces of pine from his cloak, using two pointed rocks to flick over each other, tiny sparks emitted as he continued the motion.

That was how he had made a fire last night, then. Luella wanted him to teach her how to do that, too.

Flames overtook the small heap of leaves and pine needles, and Az picked up a limb from the ground—something she hadn’t noticed before. There was a wad of dark cloth wrapped around the end. Her eyes fell upon the edges of his cloak. He had torn a strip away. To use as a… torch?

He held his makeshift torch to the fire, and plumes of smoke wafted from it as it ignited. Az stood and held it before him, waving it slightly.

Luella looked up at him. "Why do we need that? It’s daylight." Her tone conveyed her confusion, sounding exasperated and anxious at the same time.

"To ward off the wraiths," Az supplied, gesturing for her to follow with a hand. She stayed close to his side, watching as he kept the torch held out before him.

Something clicked in her mind. "They’re afraid of fire?"

"Afraid is a bit strong of a term, but for some reason, it keeps them away…" Az trailed off. "Stick to the bright spots. Away from the shadows," he instructed.

She arched a brow, stumbling into Az as he tugged her on. They left the beginnings of the cave entrance, the air frigid with the canopy of trees over them. She shivered.

Away from the shadows? Luella thought.

Suddenly, it hit her.

It was daylight.

And shadows were made with both light *and* darkness.

In the night, when they had stumbled into the dark forest, the demon had seemed wholly at ease. It was *she* who had been addled with fear while Az had comforted her.

The night held no shadows. No light. Only darkness.

But the day?

You couldn’t have shadows without light.

But that still didn’t explain how he said fire kept the wraiths away.

"The daylight," Luella nearly exclaimed. "Shadows thrive with light. But what about the fire?" Her words echoed her thoughts. She just wanted to understand. All of it. Everything.

Az kept to spots of pure sunlight on the ground, the rays peeking through the treetops above. It was the deeper shadows, nestled closer to the tall trees and hidden corners, that he stayed far, *far* away from.

"I don’t try to understand things older than I," the demon opined. The cadence of his tone made her quicken her step. "It works, and that is enough for me."

But how did he figure out that it worked? Luella wanted to ask but held her tongue.

There was a time and place for questions, and with their steady pace and his waving of the torch, she could sense that questions would not be welcomed now.

Her boots crunched on pine needles as she walked, hopping behind him, stepping where he directed her with a pointed finger and a firm gaze.

The demon gave a cocky, half-smile as if her actions were a direct representation of him. "You’re clever, Lu. You don’t need me," he said. "You’re smart enough to survive on your own."

If only he knew.

Knew how she had spent years decidedly *not* surviving on her own. But the words warmed her chest, even as they walked along, skipping over dark areas and sticking to paths lined with golden midday sun. The silence was heavy between them, and the book burned a hole inside her cloak.

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TRAPPED

The sun had fallen to become lower in the sky.

They had been walking for a few hours, and evening was almost upon them.

Az had told Luella evening and morning were the worst for the wraiths.

It made sense—the sun was lower in the sky, easier to play with the objects in its way, and cast elongated shadows against the forest floor.

Night was safe, he had said, *but not entirely so*.

You never were granted full certainty that wraiths wouldn’t be right around the corner when you were in the Silva Noctis. This was a place of darkness and light; they were mere trespassers, beholden to the whims of the sky above and the creatures below.

She wanted the night to fall. And quickly. Anything to soothe the fear that made her hands shake.

Her feet were sore, thighs aching with every step.

But they couldn’t stop.

Az rested a hand on the tree trunk nearest to him, looking back at her silently. She knew he was checking up on her. The demon had been overly attentive to her, but it made her feel inadequate.

She was… *fine*.

Well, not fine, but this was better than being caged.

"I’m okay." Luella’s breaths came in labored pants as she caught up to Az.

The crackle of deadened grass and fallen pine needles sounded harsh in her ears as her boots trampled over the earth.

He didn’t respond. They both knew she was nearing her end. Athletic prowess had never been her strong suit, even for all of her games of make-believe in Solis, pretending to ward off invisible foes.

But unlike the times when she pretended to battle, this time had very real consequences. She could not falter or give up. Would not allow herself to give in to exhaustion and fear.

They resumed their walking when Luella caught up to him, this time the demon going a touch slower. She was grateful but angry. She wished he wouldn’t treat her so delicately.

An inner thought whispered that Tharen or even King Vale would not treat her like this. Especially the mage, he seemed to enjoy pushing her far beyond her comfort levels.

As they walked, the sky grew dimmer and dimmer with the approaching evening. Twilight played with her eyes and elongated the shadows. It was when Az stumbled to an abrupt halt in front of her that Luella finally gave in to the fear she had been attempting to push down.

Az held up a hand, and Luella’s shoulder brushed his back as she swung her head around, searching for what had made him stop.

"Godsdammit," the demon cursed. A hand curled around her elbow as he tugged her closer to him. His grip was not gentle but harsh with urgency.

The flames of the makeshift torch flickered, blowing tendrils of orange and yellow heat to the side from a particularly harsh gust of wind. He held it out before him, swinging it around in a half-circle.

Something rustled in the leaves. And it was not the wind.

She gripped the back of his cloak so tight she feared it would tear.

"Az," Luella breathed out, voice shaky.

More rustling, little clicking noises. It sounded like… Sounded like teeth gnawing against each other. Snapping at the prospect of a good meal.

Luella nearly sobbed his name. "Az."

Az’s grip was harsh on her elbow, but he stood his ground. "Do not move," he commanded. "Not until I say."

She couldn’t see his face from how she was so closely tucked to his back, but she imagined his lids slanting as he peered into the dark. His feet shifted apart as he readied himself to flee while she folded into herself.

Rustling. Wooshing. The sound of something floating through the trees, knocking away limbs and fallen twigs.

Behind.

It was coming from behind her now.

Luella didn’t want to turn her head, didn’t want to see.

She tugged on his cloak. "The f-fire… Behind us." Her words were stammering and barely audible.

Az swung around, and the action was precise and poised with honed training. The fire on the torch arced as he held it out before him, right where Luella had heard that terrible sound of something *other*. Something dark.

The fire illuminated the purple-green haze of twilight. Breaking up the long shadows.

Sometimes, it was better to be in the dark.

Because in the dark, you could plead to be unknowing, pretend you didn’t see, didn’t hear. Brush off the odd noises, attribute it to the rustling of the wind.

But as the fire broke away the cloud of shadows, Luella saw all too well what made the Silva Noctis so feared.

Long, spindly limbs made entirely of shadow. Tall and towering. The edges blurred like a blotted painting.

And there was more than one.

Three wraiths floated in mid-air, nestled in the deeper crooks of shadow and hollowed spaces between the trees. They were close. So close, Luella could feel the ghastly grip of preternatural coldness against her skin. More than the chill of the harsh season.

The worst part about them was the eyes.

Glowing orbs of pure white. Two pinpricks of light in a cloud of ever-shifting dark.

They were anomalous. All three were slightly unique heights and shapes, like they were born from different shadows.

Taking on a human visage, but decidedly, *not* human. Uncanny. It made her deeply unsettled.

Az’s grip on her waist was harsh with his fear for her. She nearly yelped. He shoved her behind him, stabbing the lit torch in mid-air to ward them off.

The three wraiths did not come closer, nor did they back away. They were still and quiet, and in that stillness, Luella feared it was a calm that

would precede their demise.

Az held her so tightly to his side she didn’t know where he ended and she began. A firm, unyielding grip on her waist kept her flush to his back. But it was dark there, too. The light of the torch could only reach so far. Could only illuminate one space at a time.

Luella melded her body to his. "Why aren’t they moving?" The words were a faint whisper; she was fearful if she spoke too loud, it would disrupt the stillness of the shadows before them.

"The fire." Az held out the torch before him, the creatures making a soft hissing noise and drifting back slightly. "They won’t come closer so long as this fire burns."

Not a very reassuring thought. The flame had been dwindling as the hours had passed. How much longer could it burn?

Az seemed to agree with her thoughts.

"You keep behind me at all times," Az implored, voice deadly.

He started walking backward, feet moving as quickly as he dared, Luella tried to keep up, stumbling back, head constantly roving as her gaze was stolen by the creatures before them—advancing as they backed away—to the quickly approaching dark of the night behind her.

Were these wraiths intelligent beings? If so, Luella feared they were dead already.

Twilight was upon them, purple filtering in through the canopy above. They just had to make it a little longer, survive a little longer, and night would be here. Night, bereft of light to make shadows, and they could *breathe*.

The flames of the torch sputtered in the gusts of wind. A particularly rough gust made the embers flicker like a breath blown over it. Her lungs seized in panic, Az walking back with purposeful vigor as the wraiths used the moment of the flickering flames to advance.

A shorter wraith broke off from the trio, cutting around the side and floating toward her back, tendrils of shadows mingling with the edges. The other two kept to their front but made soft hisses as the flames sparked back to life; one tiny, blessed ember kept the fire alive.

She could barely breathe. The wraith at her back shimmered in the evening light as it waited.

Az cursed under his breath. "I don’t know how much longer this flame will last."

The demon moved, herding Luella back, back, back.

But she couldn’t. Not with the wraith seemingly lying in wait.

"Az." Luella quaked. "One is behind me."

He did not relent, forcing her to step back. "Trust me," he hissed.

She turned then, facing the shadowed figure head-on, her back to Az’s as they slowly turned in a half-circle, the demon keeping the torch outstretched. The flames cast an orange glow over the heavy purple of evening.

A branch cracked under her foot, and Luella tripped.

It happened so slowly that she could see everything in vivid detail.

The world blurred as she fell to her back, her ankle twisting as the heel of her boot caught in a tangle of fallen branches. A startled yelp fell from her lips. Az rushed to her, keeping her protected by using himself as a shield. Just in time for a sharp gust of wind to completely snuff out the last lingering embers.

Heavy darkness enveloped them.

And the wraiths lunged—

If Luella thought these creatures were not intelligent, she was proven wrong by how they moved in perfect tune with one another. All three circled Luella and Az, where he was poised over her. They were being closed in.

"Up, up!" Az barked, bending to grip her upper arm and tug her to stand.

She cried out in pain as she put her full weight on her ankle. It throbbed as she leaned into Az.

He did not speak as he pulled her, her shoulder straining with how rough he was with her. Her ankle screamed. But Luella did not utter one word of rebuttal.

It was mere survival that propelled her to ignore the throbbing pain in her ankle and the bruising grip on her arm. The hissing chill of the wraiths was around them, shadows clicking and chittering as they played with Luella and Az like predators thrilled by a hunt for food.

And that’s what they were, she realized. *Food*.

The shadowed creatures circled them, herding them like animals.

One of the wraiths shifted, floating softly to the side, tendrils of wispy shadows shimmering in the air as it moved. Luella didn’t know why, couldn’t figure it out.

The two at their backs were coming closer, swaying in the wind like the fronds of grass nestled near the bases of the large trees. All the while, the tallest one stayed just out of reach, unmoving as it waited.

Her feet stumbled, hot pain lancing up from her ankle with her every step as she was tugged along, almost tripping over fallen branches and sharp rocks. Az was relentless as he nearly jogged, relying heavily on his demon eyesight to lead the way, but Luella had no such blessing. Her eyes strained in the quickly approaching dark of night, and she wished it would hurry, that the light would dwindle and dispel the shadows completely.

Please.

A soft hiss echoed from the wraiths. And suddenly, all three let out cacophonous chitters. The sound was almost pleased.

Just as the faint rays of the orange-purple sun gave way to the darkness of night, the soft glow of the moon broke through the trees, and a few of the shadows dissipated—dissolving instantaneously as if a large paintbrush colored over them, forcing them away. A whisper of cold brushed over her nape.

She yelped, falling into Az while icy fingers skimmed across the back of her neck and tangled in her hair.

"No!" she screamed.

The shadowed hand tugged, and Luella battled against the pull.

Az did not let her go, even as the fingers in her hair pulled her back. Her demon continued to tug her to him. She felt nearly torn in two.

Strands of her hair ripped from her scalp, and she gave a soft cry of pain. The wraith closed a hand around her arm, chilled and faint, juxtaposed to Az’s warm realness against her other arm.

Az *pulled*, and Luella nearly saw stars from the bruising grip on her arm, her ankle twisting anew as her full weight was put on it, the demon wrapping two strong hands around her and tugging her into him.

Waiting by the side, the tallest wraith emitted a soft growling noise, and the icy fingers on her hair and arm dissolved like melted snow, slipping away from her tangled, golden strands and releasing her arm before she could blink.

The three wraiths floated to hover near each other, a trio of undulating shadows as the moon crested above, and the soft haze of twilight relinquished its grip to the fullness of early night.

She caught Az’s eye, warm amber melting against her skin as he forced her in front of him—always protecting her—as he walked backward to keep his sights on the wraiths, head tilted downward and horns jutting out like he wished to use them to impale the creatures. From the still-throbbing memory of the touch in her hair, Luella knew that wouldn’t work. The feel of the shadows had been faint. Like a vapor. Yet their grip had been painfully real before dissipating.

Her scalp throbbed.

Luella gripped the back of Az’s cloak, eyes on the wraiths as she stepped back.

And back.

And back—

Her foot hovered over nothingness, and then she realized with sudden clarity why the wraiths had sounded almost happy, why they had stopped their chasing and seemed content to drift and watch and wait.

Luella tumbled back, golden hair drifting upward in the frigid wind as her body fell down.

A high scream echoed from her lips as her fingernails clawed against Az’s cloak, grappling for purchase.

Az jolted into action, spinning as he attempted to grip her arm and keep her steady, but he was too late. His hands wrapped around nothing but air as Luella tumbled down into a dark hole made in the earth.

A trap.

"Lu!"

Az hopped down into the cave, landing in a crouch with a hand notched against the ground.

The demon nearly stumbled to where Luella was lying on the hard cavern floor, faint blue orbs flickering overhead as he fell to his knees beside her.

"Fuck, fuck. Angel, are you okay?" Hands patted along her chest, her legs, her arms, her head, searching for wounds.

Luella’s lungs were breathless from the fall, her back aching from where she had landed against the ground, but she was okay. Besides the

burning throb of her ankle.

She sat up, a slight groan leaving her lips. Her back twinged. "I’m… fine," she mumbled.

Affliction made Az’s brow turn down; his breaths rattled in his lungs as if he could not get enough air in his desperation to make sure she was okay.

"The truth, Lu." Az placed a gentle hand on her back to help her rise.

"Really," Luella affirmed. "I’m fine. I’ll live." She looked up to the hole above them.

It had been a short drop, but high enough, she knew neither she nor Az would be able to leave, especially not with how the rockface leading to the hole was a sharp slant upward. There were no crevices for a foothold to climb.

They were stuck.

She tried to stand, but Az stayed her movements with a palm against her shoulder.

"Don’t move yet."

He continued patting along her body, prodding against her hips and down her calves. When he touched her ankle, Luella jerked away with a sharp cry.

Az stopped, eyeing how she clenched her jaw to stop herself from making another sound. "From the fall?" His voice was deadly.

She shook her head. "When we were running from the wraiths, my boot got caught in a root."

He skimmed a hand over said boot, casting a glance up to the hole above them.

It was dark. Night had now truly fallen over the Silva Noctis. That explained why the wraiths were gone. The shadowed figures had led them here for the morning, food waiting to be feasted upon.

Luella looked to the rest of the cave they had found themselves trapped in. The cavernous space was much like the cave that had led them to the Silva Noctis but larger, deeper. More open.

The ceiling was speckled with the faint blue lights she had seen in the other cave, faint shimmers that shone down on them. The starkest difference was that it wasn’t bare of greenery like the other cave had been. Moss and vines curled up the walls deeper inside; a few trees even stood toward the back, thick roots digging into the stone ground; short blooming

bushes lined the spot near the tree, orbs of strange red berries hanging from their leaves.

"What are we going to do?" Her words fell into the hollow space of the cave. A soft plea that echoed off the walls and bounced back to her ears.

Az plucked a leaf from her hair and smoothed the strands down with a soft touch. "We survive. Always."

"What about the w-wraiths?" Luella jerked her foot back with a muffled cry as Az continued to prod at it, untying the laces on her boot.

"They lured us here," he replied, not looking up as he shimmied her boot off her foot. All the while, Luella clenched her fists, nails cutting into her palm to quell any pained protests. "They'll be back by dawn, just when the light breaks through the trees above." Az looked up; a hand braced on her calf to keep her leg steady as her boot was finally removed. "We must find a way to escape by then."

Luella wasn't sure what a wraith would want with a magicless fae. She had no power for them to feast upon. Just the measly meat on her bones. She shuddered at the memory of their shadowed fingers against her skin.

They had to find a way out.

He gently lifted her foot and turned it, fingers skimming over her swollen ankle. From the blue, dim light of the cave, it was hard to make out certain hues—Luella couldn't tell if there was bruising, but if the tenderness was anything to go by, there would be.

She tilted her head back, letting the faint blue paint her pale skin in a soft iridescence. Az worked as quickly as he could, hands warm as he tore a strip from his already mangled cloak and wrapped her ankle tightly to relieve pressure. Her teeth bit her bottom lip into a rosy plumpness to stifle the sounds of pain that threatened to rise.

"There," Az softly pronounced. He brushed his thumb over her clothed thigh. "It's the best I can do for now. I'm sorry, Lu." The demon's voice was mellow as he continued, "I couldn't keep you safe."

Luella shifted forward, ignoring the throb of her ankle as she scooted as close as possible to Az, a small hand falling on his shoulder. As she looked up into his eyes, she tried to convey all of her feelings.

"You have kept me safe." At the solemn shake of his head, Luella firmly replied, "Yes, you have, Az. *You*."

Az looked away from her. "While we were up there, I had one thought raging throughout my mind. *Keep her safe*. Lu, you have no idea what

would happen if you…" He didn’t finish his sentence, but the unspoken word lingered between them.

Died, she knew he had wanted to say.

You would have no idea what would happen if you died.

The demon didn’t know Luella only had him to live for now. Death didn’t matter much to her. But she put herself in his position. If it had been Az almost stolen by the wraiths, Luella feared what she would have done. Their bond had been forged in the dark. Unhealthy and twisted, in a way. She might have…

No, she couldn’t.

She had to live. Not for herself but for the people of Solis. For revenge.

Luella had been too wrapped up with escape she had forgotten what had driven the desire in the first place.

Her hatred for lies and treachery—for duplicitous beings, such as the King. Plying her with finery and a room even grander than her old one at Solis, regaling her with feasts, sweeping her off of her feet with lavish dances. All while keeping her firmly under lock and key, beholden to his whims and showing her off like the war prize he pronounced her to be.

So, she must strive to live. To make them all regret ever thinking she could be shrunk down and locked away.

"Feel me," she beseeched, gathering up his calloused palm to hold against her cheek. The blue light of the cave played with the shadows—non-sentient, thankfully—and turned them both into enchanted beings coated in cerulean tones. "I’m right here, Az. Alive. All because of you."

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YOU'RE HARD, TOO

"That buzzing sound," she whispered.

Luella's ears strained, but she couldn't detect much.

She sighed, popping a berry into her mouth. Tartness coated her tongue, and she hummed. It wasn't quite enough to satiate her hunger, but it would do.

A pile of red berries was on the ground between them, plucked from the bushes in the cave. They were edible, thank the gods.

Luella leaned into Az's side, his arm wrapped around her waist.

They were both nestled against one of the tall trees, thick roots that bore into the stone ground wrapped around them on either side like a hug. Coupled with Az's presence, the taste of tart berry on her tongue, and the drops of fresh and pure rainwater they had found collected in a few of the large leaves on nearby trees, Luella almost felt safe.

The book burned a hole inside her cloak, and she debated showing him. Scared. It might change everything.

Luella wasn't sure why the book had found her, but it weighed her down with some ancient sense of foreboding.

"The portals to the Silva Nocits buzz," Az replied, breaking her out of her thoughts. "It's faint, a quiet buzz. I don't know how I missed it in the other caves. I guess I was too preoccupied with you." He reached up to tweak her nose, and Luella batted his hand away with a soft smile. "If this

cave connects to the other, there could be more portals. We could get out of here. For good."

"For good," Luella mused. It sounded too good to be true.

A chill wracked her frame, and Luella burrowed closer to Az, the flame from the small fire he had made not doing much to keep her warm. He told her he didn't want to risk anything larger than the small bundle of twigs and leaves currently burning in front of them. There was more than the wraiths to be wary of in the Silva Noctis.

It grew quiet between them, Az humming softly under his breath as a hand carded up and down her side.

Her eyelids were heavy, their plan to sleep for a few hours sounded wonderful. But Luella knew she couldn't. Not yet.

With that thought in mind, she shifted, pulling the *Compendium of Fates* from within her cloak and resting it on her knees.

"What's that?" Az mumbled.

Luella tapped a finger atop the leather of the cover, drawing the demon's attention to it.

Like a shock of lightning, he grew rigid beside her, hand stilling on her waist. She didn't look up at him as she slowly opened the pages. The spine cracked, pages of unmarred white staring back up at her.

Luella waited. She had hoped the words would still be there after last time, but she guessed not.

She knew what she had to do next.

Her pale hand raised, hovering between her and Az as she peeked up at him. "I trusted you. Now it's your turn to trust me."

Luella brushed her pointer finger over the demon's horn, bearing down as she pricked the tip of it. He did not jerk away, forcing himself to be still and *trust*, just as she had asked. Even as his eyes narrowed in confusion.

Blood welled at the tip, and she held her finger up, watching the maroon drop grow. The weight was too heavy to stay on her finger, and gravity took over, the droplet of blood falling and splattering on the pure white of the page. Red webs overtook the endless white, words filling the once-empty spaces.

But not entirely.

Just like last time, not all was revealed. Only the title on the first page, *Compendium of Fates*, and as she slowly flipped through it, her breath caught at the sight of the familiar poem… or prophecy.

Luella wasn’t sure what to call it.

But the words had been imprinted on her brain. She knew them by heart. Could recite them at will.

Her voice was quiet, serious, as she shakily began.

"*To expel the dark, the shadow’s spark, and defeat the stolen, she must bond with the chosen…."*

The mournful words were a hearkened warning. And they washed over Luella and Az like starkly cold ocean waves, nearly drowning them both under their power.

She read until she couldn’t. Until the torn-apart pages stopped her in her tracks, forcing her to live in a state of constant curiosity.

Az’s fingers dug into her waist. Still, she did not look at him. Her eyes burned as she watched the words on the pages.

"Where did you find that?" His voice was deep.

And Luella shared it all.

Az had already seen the alcove in the library and knew of its untouched age. But she told him of how she felt compelled toward it. Told him about Nyx. About the persistent drive to uncover what the little stone wedged in the walls had been hiding.

Only when she was finished, did she finally look at him.

His dark brow was lowered in heavy thought, amber eyes molten with secrets. As he rolled his lip between his teeth, he brushed a hand over the cover of the book.

"I wanted to keep you from this. Not throw you into the midst of it." Az shook his head, darkness teeming in his eyes. Even the fire and the faint blue light overhead did little to dispel it.

"What do you mean?" Luella asked.

He did not respond.

She tried a different tactic.

"What do you know of the Umbra?"

With a deadly voice, the demon inquired, "Where the fuck did you hear that name?"

Luella’s hand fluttered to her throat. She had never heard him sound so angry. Not directed toward her, anyway.

"I-I," she stammered.

"Fuck," he cursed low under his breath. "I’m not angry with you, Lu. I just need to understand what you know."

Her brow furrowed. He was making less and less sense with every word he said.

What she knew?

What did she know?

It felt like nothing most days.

Luella softly stuttered her way through an explanation, nowhere near as put together as her story of the nook in the library and Nyx. He grew more furious with every word that fell from her anxiously bitten lips.

When she mentioned overhearing the King and the others in the library, Az growled. She stopped talking, and he urged her onward with a soft touch, completely at odds with his angered demeanor.

And when she said the *other* word. The word that had been niggling at her mind like an infection, *Tenebrae*, he shot up, displacing her from where she was tucked to his side.

Az turned to face her, and Luella met his stare with hesitancy.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No," he said, but his tongue poked into his cheek.

She wasn’t inclined to believe him.

"You know what it means. Don’t you?" Luella’s resolve was firm. She would get answers. This time, she would not relent due to fear.

The demon gave a rough, singular nod of his head.

At her look of excitement—*finally, answer*s—he faced her fully. "It is dangerous."

"More dangerous than spending the night in a cave in the Silva Noctis?" She arched a brow.

"Yes," Az cut in. "Far more dangerous."

"I feel—" Luella huffed. "Something is going on. Something I don’t know. Little pieces… Nothing makes sense. It’s all so confusing," she said, words coming out disjointed; they had been simmering in her chest far too long for eloquence. "I just want to understand. I don’t want to live in the dark anymore."

"Angel, haven’t you learned? The light can be worse than the dark. But both together? We may not stand a chance."

She didn’t know what to think of that. Somehow, Luella suspected those words were far more telling than she realized.

Her lower lip jutted out slightly in a soft pout.

Az inhaled. "The Umbra answers to the Tenebrae. Both are made of the dark. But the Tenebrae *is* the dark. The Umbra are an army of shadows."

"Army of shadows?" Her mouth parted. "Az, I don’t understand."

"Be glad. Soon you will." The demon lowered his head, mouth ghosting over hers. Warm breath entered her still-parted lips as he uttered, "And once you do, there will be no going back."

"Help me understand," she implored, trying to ground herself against his arresting gaze. It was hard—to be caught in a snare of warm amber and the richness of his scent.

"The Tenebrae and its army are everywhere. You have met it before, and you will meet it again."

The words made her shiver. Sounding as prophetic as the lines in the book still resting on her lap.

Luella fingered the leather cover, the edges of the pages rough against her fingertip. A golden curl, frizzy and unkept, fell against her cheek as she looked down. "I’m frightened."

A warm finger notched against her chin, lifting her face. "So am I. But we’re together, Lu. Always. I have you now, and I will not let you go," he vowed.

His declaration soothed something within her.

She was scared of shadows and darkness and things that had been right next to her, all this time.

She had met this Tenebrae before? The Umbra, too?

How? *When*?

Luella couldn’t handle it anymore. Not tonight.

Her lids were heavy with exhaustion, ankle throbbing. The heat of the fire and warmth radiating from the demon at her side threatened to pull her into sleep.

"Rest, Lu," Az carded a hand down her side, placing a firm palm on her thigh.

He pulled her into him, gentle touches making her forget about shadows and darkness and light. Almost.

"And you?" she breathed. "Will you rest, too?"

The demon tutted under his breath. "Don’t worry about me, angel. I’ll keep watch."

"I—" Luella started. "I don’t know if I can sleep."

Az gave an understanding nod, and she shifted to curl into his side, wincing as the movement jostled her ankle. After their talk, Az had put her boot back on, just in case they had to leave quickly. And the stiff leather of the book rubbed against her swollen skin uncomfortably. Luella didn’t even know if she would be able to walk if she had to, let alone run.

A large tree root dug into her back as she curled her other leg up, leaving the injured one outstretched. She kept twitching, trying to find a comfortable spot on this hard, unforgiving ground. At least the tree and the many roots curling around them and digging into the ground offered a makeshift backrest.

"For me. Rest." Az brushed a soft fingertip over her eyelashes, forcing her lids to close. The fire warmed her side, but it had nothing on his natural heat. "You’ll do no good if you’re worn out, angel."

She hummed in agreement, placing her cheek on his chest as she tried to find a spot that didn’t put so much pressure on her spine. "Why do you call me that?"

"What?"

"Angel," Luella asked.

"Because you’re my angel. My salvation."

"Oh," she breathed in reply. Her fingers toyed with the torn hem of his cloak, bunched around his waist from how he was reclining.

His words took her back to their first meeting. The way he had said he had been waiting for her. It still didn’t make sense, but much didn’t these days.

Call her naive, but for now, Luella found herself holding onto her state of unknowing, content to stay there for as long as she was able.

After a few more moments of her restless squirming, Az carefully lifted her by the waist and moved her. She looked at him, curious.

"I can’t let you sleep on the hard ground. You’ll never get any rest," Az mumbled, a contemplative look on his face. "Here." He shifted to lay down fully on the ground, back propped up and legs slightly spread.

He gathered her up, and she let out a quiet, "Oof!"

Tucking her under his chin, Luella rested on top of Az’s warm body, her stomach pressed to his chest.

"But you’re hard, too," she remarked, hands folded atop his chest as she peered up at him.

Az’s amber eyes grew wide, and he huffed in amusement, mumbling something unintelligible under his breath. He flicked the tip of her nose, adoration softening his eyes.

Luella curled her leg up, the other still outstretched. She continued to shift around slightly, not used to being in such proximity to a male. He was hard where she was soft, and the difference made her head light. She didn’t know where to put her legs. Where to rest her hands. They were so close.

Az stilled her movements with a hand on her hips, the other skimming up her thighs, parting them to straddle his waist. Her bent leg dangled off the side, the other flush against his strong thigh.

That was better.

Okay. Luella could maybe get some sleep like this. If only she wasn’t so aware of how her thighs made a perfect cradle for his hips.

"Comfortable?" Az rubbed a hand down her back in a soothing motion.

She buried her face into the crook of his neck, inhaling deeply that rich scent of his she loved so much. "Yes."

"Good," he rumbled. "Now, go to sleep."

Her eyes closed, and all the while, his hands trailed up her back, fingers tracing shapes and patterns into her skin as he hummed quietly under his breath. Little lullabies that took her back to their time in the dungeons when he sang her to sleep from the other side of the iron bars.

A deep breath, drowning in Az’s scent and luxuriating in his presence, and Luella’s body grew heavy, hands slackening where she had buried them in his shirt.

Underneath the earth, nestled in a forest of shadows, in a place where Luella should feel anything but safe, she found herself more at peace than she had been within the tall walls of the castle.

At least here, she was free.

Tendrils of smoke drifted from the snuffed-out fire, following them as they walked deeper into the cave.

Shadows were cast against the towering walls. As Luella peered over her shoulder, she couldn’t help but fear those shadows would take form, spindly claws reaching to grab and devour.

It was no matter that Az had told her the caves were somehow immune to the touch of the wraiths; she didn’t know how he came about *that* information.

Luella’s eyes were gritty, and her head was groggy with sleep, but she trudged forward. One foot in front of the other, hobbling along, propped up with Az’s hand notched under her arm, allowing her to take some weight off of her ankle.

"Before I woke you, I ventured deeper into the cave and heard buzzing from within," Az supplied.

Luella started at hearing he had left her.

He quickly added, "I did not go far. Never could I part from you for long. Let’s pray the exit will lead anywhere other than Serpentis."

She had been praying. It never did seem to help.

Maybe the gods were as fictitious as her mother used to claim. Even as a fae, her mother had never been one to fall in line with piety. Perhaps there had been some merit in that. With every unanswered prayer, Luella felt her beliefs flicker and threaten to die out.

The lingering warmth that had acted as a soft blanket in the heart of the cave dwindled with every step they took onward. She was thankful for the light reflecting above, cascading down on them with blue glimmers in the dark. If it weren’t for that, she didn’t know what they would have done—Az had said no fire, not deeper in the cave, lest they attract the attention of things better left unbothered.

Their steps were hurried. As hurried as they could be with her injured ankle. As they walked, Luella felt her palms grow clammy with sweat, her hair sticking to her nape with perspiration as the pain increased. She tried to shove it down. Found herself leaning into Az more and more as they walked.

He noticed. He always noticed.

"Lu," Az called, steadying her with a hand on her shoulder.

She let out a weary sigh, looking up at him. They stopped, the demon hoisting her up when she nearly toppled over from the abrupt halt. She felt odd.

He searched her eyes, amber flicking back and forth. His brow was drawn low in worry, and the muscles in his jaw twitched. "Can you hold on a little longer? For me?"

"I’m trying," she hummed.

It would have to be enough for now. It’s not like they had a choice. Venture forward, or go back and deal with the infamous wrath of King Vale.

More walking… Even her uninjured foot grew sore; her heels likely blistered in her boot.

Az never let her go, keeping an arm wrapped so tightly around her she was fused to his side. Never faltering in his steady support and protection, vigilantly scanning the area up ahead, always ready to engage in a fight.

She was lucky. To have him. Maybe her prayers had been answered in a way.

Their breaths—hers, short and shallow, and his, steady and deep—suddenly were accompanied by a new sound as the vast tunnel they wandered grew smaller.

Buzzing. The air was buzzing.

A noise that reminded her of the beating of a hummingbird’s wings or the drone of bees in a hive. Incessant and low.

"Finally," Az breathed out. The word made her look up at him, and she found his expression awed, filled with relief.

"Is that—" She broke off, unable to finish. What if it was just in her head? What if the sound was a manifestation of her exhaustion? And not what she thought it to be—the sound of an escape.

Az’s fingers clenched once where they were wrapped around her ribs. "It is."

He tugged her forward, their steps becoming out of tune and awkward as he pulled her against the stone, her injured foot dragged on the ground. He practically carried her the rest of the way. The tunnels bent and curved, sloping downward, as the ceiling closed in. Still, they did not relent.

The buzzing grew louder, a pulse in the air. Like the cave itself had a real, beating heart.

The air around them grew dense, and Luella struggled to break through the heaviness. It bogged her down. Made her feel like she was underwater, the currents pulling her under.

Just when she felt like she may collapse under the pressure, the endless path of the cave opened up.

An innocuous cut in the stone. A doorway, almost. There was no blue light shining within. It was wholly dark. It looked so similar to the hollowed *not*-door in the library.

Az pressed the side of her face to his chest, a hand clapped over her exposed ear.

It was so *loud*.

She wasn’t sure why. The entrance they had taken to the Silva Noctis had barely been audible, for they both missed it. Yes, this one was a scream in the silence of deep earth, echoing where no one would ever hear.

"That’s the sound of freedom." Az pressed a kiss to the crown of her head.

Luella gave an exhausted, pained smile. "We’re getting out of here."

She could almost feel the weight of invisible shackles being freed as they stepped through the gateway, leaving the Silva Noctis—and Serpentis—behind.

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WOLVES

The ground was firm under Luella’s feet.

The air smelt of a soft breeze, and the faintest tangle of vines crawling over the side of the cave tickled her face as she parted the curtain of greenery.

Az led the way as they stepped out of the cave and into the fresh air.

It was not too cold. Not exactly warm, either, but a quaint between.

She looked back, seeing the gateway they had stumbled out of as an inconspicuous hole nestled in the side of the rockface. The mountain towered above, partially blocking out the sun. Wisteria fell to the ground, tendrils brushing on the floor of the meadow; a large weeping willow stood at the far end, branches slumped downward, green leaves pooling along the ground.

Everything was blooming and beautiful, even with the barest hint of chill permeating the air.

They weren’t in Medius—it was too warm for that. And definitely not Serpentis or Nix, either.

Az seemed to come to the same conclusion. "One of the fae kingdoms?" he asked, kicking a rock with the toe of his boot.

"I-I don’t know." Luella bit her lip. "I’ve never been to any of the other kingdoms."

A butterfly with blue wings perched on a low-hanging branch, and Luella cocked her head as she eyed the beautiful creature. She raised a

hand, and the butterfly fluttering in front of her delicately perched on the tip of her finger. Luella gave a soft smile, and the tiny thing left as quickly as it came. A reminder of the beauty the world was capable of holding.

Az’s grip on her hand tightened. "You are extraordinary."

"I—"

How could she respond to that?

She blushed, focusing on her steps as they slowly ambled along. She leaned into Az for support.

The ground was ripe with plants, and her brain spun as she tried to pick out anything edible to quell the grumbling of her stomach.

Nestled closer to the ground, a thick bush filled with petals of yellow and white.

"Over there." Luella pointed to the bush, and Az guided her over. She bent at the waist, her injured foot hovering as she plucked a few tiny pieces from it. Lifting it to her nose, she inhaled deeply. Honey and soft nectar.

The notes of sweetness reminded her of a certain raven shifter…

Luella pinched the base of the small flower away and pulled out the pistil, popping the end into her mouth to suck on. She hummed at the taste. It wasn’t much. Barely enough to quell her thirst with the short burst of nectar, but after the scant amounts of sustenance she had had, it tasted divine.

She handed one to Az, mumbling around the end of the flower that was in her mouth, "Here."

The demon gave a soft shake of his head in amusement but acquiesced, copying her movements as she showed him what to do.

Luella’s hands grew sticky with nectar, and she licked it off of her fingers, not willing to waste a drop. Az grabbed her hand before she could lick any more of the juice off, catching her eye as he slowly brought her hand to his mouth.

"Let me," Az mumbled against her palm before softly sucking her finger into his mouth.

The blush on her cheeks spread down to her chest. And lower.

Az’s mouth was warm and wet, and when he pulled her finger away, there was a part of Luella that felt almost dejected by the loss of him.

She cleared her throat, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "If there are honeysuckles, there might be some wild lettuce…"

His lips quirked up into a satisfied half-smirk, but he took her elbow regardless, content to ignore the heated charge between them.

Az led her as she pointed at plants, moving closer so she could inspect them. Finally, she saw the telltale sign of the short, crawling plant. He uprooted it for her, holding it before him curiously. Luella took it and tore off a leaf, putting it in her mouth with a grimace.

It was bitter, but she forced herself to chew.

"What does that do?" Az asked.

She swallowed down the urge to spit out the weed. "It can act as a mild pain relief. Let’s keep the rest just in case." She tucked it into one of the inside pockets of her cloak.

"How do you know all of this?" He sucked the nectar off of another honeysuckle.

Luella eyed the golden dawn sun peeking out overhead. She never realized how much she could miss it after being forced underground.

"At h—" Luella’s eyes lowered. It felt wrong to say *home*. "At Solis, all there was to do was read and study. I wasn’t allowed to attend balls or mingle."

It was only after she said it that she realized how sad it sounded.

Without the shadows nipping out their heels, their pace was slower.

The bitter taste of wild lettuce in her mouth slowly worked to soothe the piercing ache in her ankle. Not completely, but enough that she didn’t feel on the verge of passing out if she put her full weight on it.

As they walked, they came across no signs of life, no buildings. Only the forest creatures and ripe flora welcomed them in this kingdom they had stumbled into.

Luella would have to guess Terra or Aer. Ignis was dark, ripe with volcanoes and pools of lava; Aqua was comprised mostly of oceans and lakes. And it certainly wasn’t Luna. Luella hadn’t seen many drawings of the kingdom, but from what she had studied, Luna was a lonely, barren land. Nothing like the rich forest that stood before her.

Az held a branch out of the way for her, and Luella ducked to round it.

Bravery strengthed her in the daylight, so far from Serpentis.

"So," she started. "You seem to have a history with the King. Tell me."

The mention of King Vale made the air grow terse, but Luella refused to live in fear of just a name.

"We knew of each other even before we met. Graves used to be a… friend." His tone was hesitant. "Not quite. But we had an agreement of sorts. He deals in secrets, and I was his ears in the Below. In exchange, he would grant me favors."

Luella knew far too much about how the male valued his secrets.

"Favors from Graves are worth more than gold in this world. In some parts, he's simply called the Knight."

"The K-Knight." Luella's lips stumbled around the word. It fit him. Suddenly, she had a startling memory of arriving at Serpentis, whispers of *the Knight* reverberating throughout the square. "The Knight made of night," she could not help but say.

Az held her stare even as he gave a soft rumble of amusement. "Yes. Though, he's far from knightly."

"Oh." She stumbled over a tree root. "What's his story? How did a raven shifter fall in with the King?" Shifters were more powerful than humans, more powerful than the fae, but a raven shifter in the inner circle of the dragon shifter King? It was unheard of.

Az smirked. "Raven feathers aren't the only kind he has."

"What do you mean?"

"I would say ask him, but…" The demon grew pensive, voice low. "He would tell *you* if you only asked."

The way he said it, Luella understood Az meant the shifter would only share that information with *her*. She wasn't sure why—why did he place so much value on her?

She tried not to pay attention to the first part of what Az had said. *Ask him*. As if she was destined to see Graves again.

Was their escape doomed before it even began? Hope seemed too lowly of a thing to have. Did the demon not have conviction they would stay free?

"What about how you all met? You said you knew each other before," Luella led, desperate for answers.

Tiny, blue wings fluttered, the butterfly from before landing atop a bush. Luella looked down only to see a collection of berry bushes. Her mouth watered at the sight.

Red, plump berries decorated the small bush, and before she could blink, Az plucked a few from it, holding one up to her lips.

"For you," he said with a strange expression flickering over his features.

Luella’s lips gently wrapped around the strawberry, and she refused to allow herself to break his gaze—no matter how desperately she wanted to look away from the heat simmering in his eyes. As she bit down, juices dribbled down her chin and over his fingers. It was delicious. Perfectly ripe.

He pulled away the other half of the bitten berry and brought it to his own mouth, biting down in a near savage manner. A half-kiss. Their lips against the same ripe, succulent flesh of the berry.

She flushed. Only then, under the intensity of his stare, did Luella look away.

She batted away the second berry he pressed to her lips. She wouldn’t be distracted. Luella stared up at him, waiting for him to answer her earlier question. They walked in silence for a few moments.

Az finally sighed. "Our meeting was unexpected. Not the best." A dark brown curl flopped over his forehead as he shook his head, his horns casting thin shadows over his temples. "We were all hotheaded. Aggressive."

"Were?" Luella teased.

Az threaded his fingers through hers, carefully lifting her over a fallen tree trunk. He kept his hands on her as he expertly hopped over it, ensuring she would be supported as he conceded, "*Are*." He huffed a laugh. "And we’re all after the same thing. None of us are any good at sharing."

It sounded like they had known each other for a while. And had even been close.

So how could the King exile him to the dungeons? How could anyone do that to someone they were supposedly close with—not quite friends, but certainly not enemies?

Az had been forthcoming thus far. Luella didn’t want to ruin it by asking questions that would upset him.

Something in her yearned to know. To uncover the pieces of himself he kept hidden away.

If Luella had to wager a guess, she would say Az was simply too kind for them, for their treachery and plotting. They knew it, too. She was sure they butted heads on more than one occasion. Perhaps eventually, it had become too much for King Vale, and he had banished Az to the dungeons.

Luella shuddered. She could never imagine being locked away underground for so long.

But you've been locked away above *ground for your whole life,* her mind whispered.

What's the difference between a tower above and a dungeon below?

"How long?" The question was a quiet breath uttered from her lips like she feared the birds above were listening in on their conversations.

"Nearly two decades," Az replied somberly.

That was her whole life. She couldn't bear the thought of him trapped for so long in darkness.

Luella squeezed his hand. Sometimes, words weren't enough.

Mind addled and body aching with tiredness with every step they trudged forward, Luella couldn't go any longer. She pressed a hand to the demon's chest to signal a stop. She leaned against a tree as she rested for a moment, head tilting back as she soaked in the midday sun.

She was tired of running and looking over her shoulder. Luella wondered if she ever would find peace.

The faintest traces of throbbing heat lanced through Luella's ankle and up her calf as she shifted. She hissed.

Az fit a strong hand under her arm while the other dug into the pockets of her cloak. His fingertips brushed against her hipbone, and she jerked from the unexpected touch. He pulled out another leaf of wild lettuce, and her nose scrunched at the sight.

"Chew," he demanded, pressing the bitter leaf against her lips. It tickled, and as she opened her mouth to take it from him, he chuffed the underside of her chin with a hand. "There has to be a village around. A healer. You cannot keep going like this."

Luella nodded, slowly chewing as she thought. Even rural areas should have small villages, a few cottages or outposts, travelers wandering through the woods… They should have run into someone by now.

Az let her rest for a bit, then with a quietly mumbled inquiry into her level of pain, they were off again. A leisurely pace, for which Luella was thankful. She had time to soak it all in. Discoveries of a place she had never been before.

They were both content to journey in silence. A quiet and comfortable companionship they had crafted deep in the dungeons—satisfied to simply exist in each other's orbit.

A flash of something white caught the corner of her eye as they walked.

Luella whipped her head around, searching in the now-dim light of evening.

"What is it?" Az flicked his gaze to her.

"I thought I saw—" Luella peered in between the space of two oak trees. No flashes of white. No gleaming eyes. "Nothing."

Her breath left her in a soft exhale.

She was nervous. That was all.

It couldn’t have possibly been what she thought.

The barest flash, but it looked so much like the white coat of a wolf.

But not just any wolf. A larger-than-normal trio of beasts with appetites for the enemies of their master.

"What happened here?"

Luella looked around, face paling with every passing moment.

Crumbling structures, once beautiful homes in ruin. Smoke wafted overhead. Large, thick plumes made her eyes water. And the *smell*. Luella gagged.

It was the scent of charred flesh. Rancid, rotting bodies.

The bountiful forest had given way to rolling valleys of beautiful flowers…

Luella had kept chanting in her head, *one more step, one more step*.

And when they had stumbled across a hill, interlaced with a flowing stream of crystalline water at its base and the barest hint of smoke billowing from the other side of it, she had been filled with hope.

Freedom.

Every step made her feel light with elation, the pain in her ankle nearly forgotten in the face of anticipation. They had stumbled up the green grass of the hill, rising and rising, hands fumbling to aid her when she felt like she could not make it. And just as they crested it—Az going first, with Luella a step behind—she knew it was all a lie.

Standing atop the hill, looking down on the ruins of a village, hope was stolen from her once more. Would she ever learn—to not hope, to not dream or wish? Wishing never did anyone any good, least of all her.

Az shouldered ahead, forcing her a step behind him. He covered her with his body, shoulders tense under the thickness of his cloak. The hood was back over his head, concealing his side profile from view, the barest hint of his horns peeked out from under it. Luella pulled back her hood, looking behind her, down the knoll, and past the expanse of sprawling hills and meadows of wildflowers.

It was there that she saw it. The tiniest flash of white fur. Shooting from the base of a towering sunflower to the midst of a field of wheat, disappearing out of sight.

Luella’s throat worked. She had thought it was all in her head. But everywhere they went, they were there. The wolves.

If they were here, then Tharen couldn’t be far behind.

She still hadn’t told Az; though, she knew she should. She just… couldn’t bear it.

"The Umbra," Az rasped. He turned, facing her with a visage of severity. "*This* is the work of the Umbra, Lu. The Tenebrae has an army we cannot defeat. And I will not risk you." He gripped her shoulders, and as she looked up at him, Luella felt utterly defeated. "What I’ve been trying so hard to keep you from," Az choked out.

Luella’s lashes fanned across her too-pale cheeks as she blinked, frustration boiling over. "You can’t keep me locked away from everything, Az. If you did, you… you would be just like the rest of them."

His expression grew shuttered, the soft openness marred by cold detachment.

A hand fluttered to her lips. That had been too far.

Az had proven time and time again that he wanted to protect her. But not by locking her away. They were in this together. Always.

The demon turned, giving her his back as they silently faced the destruction below them. Smoke billowed, and the air was quiet and still with death, the aftermath of war and utter destruction.

What sort of horrors had these villagers faced in their last moments?

Luella placed her hands on Az’s cloak, feeling his strength under her palms as she rested her forehead against his back. "I’m sorry," she murmured.

He didn’t say anything. Didn’t even acknowledge that he heard her.

"Please forgive me," Luella pleaded. "I don’t know how to do this. Rely on someone. It’s been me, for forever. I know you want to keep me safe, but

I don’t understand what’s going on. Too many secrets have been kept from me, and I’m stumbling around in the dark without light, trying to find my way. A fortnight ago, I didn’t even know anything was wrong. And now… I’m expected to grasp the notion of some"—Luella’s hands clenched the fabric of his cloak—"undefeatable enemy made of darkness."

Her final words were a soft breath, whispered against his back, "Give me time."

She didn’t look up. Didn’t move at all, not even when warm hands gathered up hers, and a finger lifted her chin.

"Open those beautiful eyes, angel."

She did, pools of warm amber melting her despair.

"You’re forgiven before you ever even do anything." Az brushed a thumb over her soft cheeks as he stared down at her. "I’m not mad. Not at *you*," he stressed. "But at them. This situation. The fact that I cannot keep you safe, even when that is all I have ever wanted."

"Truly?" Luella asked. "You’re not mad?"

He shook his head, a soft look overtaking his features as he brushed his thumb over her cheek. She forgot all about the ravaged village before them, the flash of a prowling wolf behind. Focused solely on the male before her.

He was fearsome, with his curling horns and tanned skin and the few scars on the backs of his hands and forearms. But with her, he was soft. With her, he was the accumulation of everything she had ever dared to pray about.

"You’ve been kept in the dark. I know, Lu. Solis—" Az blew out a harsh breath. "It’s not what you think. None of it is. Fuck, even King Vale isn’t what you believe him to be. Even though he’s a prick, he’s fighting. And that’s admirable in its own right."

Her heart picked up while breath left her lungs, a soft and invisible fizzle that felt as lofty as the tendrils of black smoke curling in the air. If she heard one more time that things weren’t as they seemed, she might very well murder someone for answers, she wanted them so desperately.

"If you say King Vale isn’t as he seems, then why were you so willing to escape with me?"

Az ran a hand through the few dark brown curls sticking out from his hood, tousling the strands into further disarray. A curl flopped over his forehead, and she itched to push it back.

"You come first. Always," he said.

None of it made sense. And the way he mentioned her home, Solis. Luella thought back to when she first arrived in Serpentis. The vile things the villagers spewed at her like she was no more than a rodent living in sewage. Even the smallest children had looked at her with such hatred. Was Solis to blame? Her parents had never been kind to her—or others—but Luella couldn't fathom them having anything to do with such evil.

She looked at the destruction below, rolling her bottom lip between her teeth. The foul odor of decaying bodies assaulted her, wafting on the plumes of smoke that colored the sky an ugly, mottled grey and black.

Words poised on the tip of her tongue. But to say what, Luella would never know.

A resounding howl from behind them, joined by two more lonesome calls. Long and weary, like a cry of begrudging triumph.

Az whipped to face the noise, hand locked around Luella's upper arm as he tucked her into his side.

They looked out upon the other side of the knoll, their backs to the wasteland of the village as they stared down on the untouched grassy plains and meadows and the field of wheat.

The golden fronds parted, swaying from more than just the gentle breeze of the early evening.

She saw the teeth first—glinting as lips drew back, revealing sharp fangs she knew were capable of tearing limbs into little chunks.

Luella stumbled, injured ankle twisting in her haste. She hissed, and Az barely caught her before she fell.

"Godsdamn it," Az seethed. He forced the hood of his cloak back. No use for it now.

They had been found.

And Luella wanted to cry out the force of her resentment to the sky.

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THE SECOND BATTLE PT. 1

"Stay still."

Luella’s eyes shifted, and she forced herself to remain unmoving. She wanted to scoff.

Oh, yes. Like she was in danger of moving when three large wolves were prowling closer to them…

The trio of wolves stalked closer, tall fronds of grass rustling as they came upon the base of the knoll. Her heart stuttered. They were fast. Vicious. All it would take was a mere moment, and they would be upon where she and Az stood.

Was Tharen nearby? Was he… watching?

Why did that thought not make her sick to her stomach? Luella felt compelled to scan the treeline in the distance, searching for a large frame, inky black tattoos, and a shock of white braids.

Nothing. She saw nothing.

Az slowly gripped her hand, using the sleeve of their cloaks to hide the motion.

"When I say go, you run," he mumbled.

Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession. The sky was mottled with a haze of gray vapor. Foreboding, like the predators before them.

"Run where?" Luella whispered.

One of the wolves let out a low growl at the sound of her voice, and she forced her limbs to still. Suddenly, Az’s command did not seem all that

bizarre. Her body wanted to flee, an atavistic response in the face of these predators.

Every time she blinked, she heard the crunch of bone and splatter of blood against the marble floors of the throne room—the memory of what these beasts were capable of.

But she reminded herself that was at the behest of their master. And Luella did not spot the mage. Would Tharen even be allowed to order his wolves to attack her? She was still under the protection of the King.

Az lowered his head, horns jutting out as he stared the trio of wolves down with an unflinching gaze. "The village."

"But—"

"No," Az hissed. "Trust me. Remember. Do as I say."

The village loomed behind, death standing on either side of them. She didn't dare look behind her at the ruins, but she could feel the claws of dark death that had seeped into the once quaint village. The scent of decaying bodies offered some sense of relief. Perhaps they were all dead and gone. But the bodies… Would she see them?

Chills cascaded down her arms.

The wolves broke apart, forming an almost triangular formation before them.

The leader, the largest of the three beasts, placed a paw on the base of the hill, head lowering and jutting out as he peered up at them with gleaming eyes.

The other two shifted, not relenting in their slow pace.

Trapping them.

The wolves were trapping them.

Her palm grew clammy in Az's grip, and just as the leader of the pack lowered, body pressed tightly to the ground as his haunches raised, ears flattened to his head, Az broke his steady stillness.

"Run!" he bellowed.

Luella's feet tripped over the air as she followed his command, body spinning and ankle throbbing fiercely—she ignored it all, focusing solely on the village before her.

Az pressed a hand against her back, the other wrapped around her hand. He didn't let her go, not once, as they fled down the hill. The wind whipped her hair against her cheeks, and it blew out behind her.

Thick, acrid smoke stung her nostrils, eyes watering. She coughed, free hand pressed to her mouth as they navigated the ruins of the village.

The wolves howled and barked, echoes of glee as they began their hunt.

She knew she shouldn’t, but Luella looked behind her.

The trio stood tall at the top of the knoll, the largest in the center. Their maws were exposed, glistening with dripping saliva.

"Lu, come." Az jerked her by the hand, forcing her into the maze of the village.

The ground was a wasteland, filled with brittle fragments of bone and chunks of rotted flesh, fallen structures all around, and the sides of houses, cottages, and tradeposts crumbled to nothing but ash. The village center—a small square with a well and a few lampposts with empty candles—was empty.

Rock crunched under their boots as they ran, weaving in and out of buildings to shake off their hunters. Her breath was labored as Az dragged her along. Luella limped, gate unsteady, a hand pressed to a rough stone wall for support as he tugged her inside a small building.

Weapons hung along the wooden walls, some half-finished and others beautiful and pristine. A smithy.

A large furnace lay in the center of the room, the inside filled with cold, unused coal. Exposed beams were above, some destroyed by the attacks and fallen haphazardly to the ground, creating a labyrinth. The ceiling was mostly intact, but a small hole was near the back. Chunks of wood and stone had collapsed on the ground underneath.

It was empty of all life, no bustling fae toiling over the furnace or hammering against iron.

Tears pricked her eyes. Evidence of lives once lived.

Near the caved-in part of the roof, the wooden beams made a small hideaway, and that was where Az dragged her. But not before taking a long sword with a wickedly curved edge from its spot on the wall and a smaller dagger, the blade the size of her palm.

"Get in," the demon ordered, pressing the dagger into her hand.

She gripped the carved hilt. It was crude wood that scratched against her palm. Luella rubbed a finger over the side of the blade. Deadly and sharp. It was enough, even though she would have to get close to her enemies to use it.

Her ankle throbbed as she stood her ground, but she didn’t obey him. Not this time. "What about you?"

There’s no way Az could fit. It was nothing more than a small hole, barely big enough for her, let alone someone his size.

Howls resounded outside, but they sounded far away. They had time.

Drawing in an uneven breath, Luella flexed her hand against his, the other still clutching the dagger with a white-knuckled grip. "I will not leave you to fend for yourself, Az. I think you’ve been alone long enough. We’re together."

At Luella’s words, Az cupped her cheek, bending down to press a rough kiss to her brow. "I have to keep you safe, Lu, for reasons you don’t yet know. You are our salvation."

He pulled back, pressing down on her shoulders and forcing her to her knees. She grimaced as the action aggravated her ankle, but she was far past caring now.

Knelt on the ground, rubble biting into her kneecaps, hair tousled and soot coating her skin, Luella looked up at Az with softly shining, gold eyes. "Come back to me," she implored.

Az’s answering promise was warm and firm as he vowed, "Always."

Hiding. Always hiding.

Her hands pressed to her mouth to stifle the sound of her breathing, to cover the faint whimpers that escaped from her lips with every echoed snarl and growl that reverberated through the ghostly village.

In the absence of life, everything seemed louder. A clink of a pebble under her boot, as she shifted, was a thundering boom.

But—

Maybe that wasn’t a mere pebble.

The ground shook under her, rock and dust falling from the beams overhead and piles of rubble that hid her, growing ashy as they shifted from the force of… Whatever that was.

She pressed a hand over her head to steady herself, the large chunk of the wooden beam notched precariously above her felt unsteady under her fingers.

Was she safe here? She hadn’t given much thought to how, exactly, she would die, but being crushed under a building was not a way she would like to go. Hanging, beheading, a dagger to the throat—all ways Luella had resigned herself to meet her end, but not this.

Another resounding boom rocked throughout the village.

Smoke billowed, wafting throughout the smithy and forcing her eyes to water. Dust particles choked her, lungs seizing as she drew in contaminated air.

She had to go.

Luella couldn’t stay here.

This whole structure seemed as though it would collapse.

And the *noises* outside. Dare she risk it?

Thundering crashes so loud her ears rang, and a trio of yipping howls and calls.

Something else was under those sounds, nearly drowned out by the loud cadence, but she heard it. It sounded like… metal. The zing of a blade meeting another.

Oh, no.

She pictured Az fighting off Tharen, and her blood ran cold.

Mind made up, Luella crawled from her spot, the dagger hitting the ground as her hands shifted over the rough pieces of rock littering the floor.

Luella stood with shaky legs, mouth downturned as her ankle throbbed in protest. The smithy was silent. Too silent. The call of the wolves had abated, and her ears strained as she waited for the boom of *something* to unleash once more.

The hole in the ceiling above her let in a scant amount of quickly dimming sunlight, marred by the thick smoke that permeated the air, making everything look hazy. Like a dream.

A thick shadow cast against the ground, its image distorted by the chunks of fallen rock and beams of broken wood. She jerked back, spine hitting a particularly large piece of rubble as she hid herself away from the exposed spot.

Pressing a hand to her mouth, the other that held the dagger shook so hard it nearly fell from her grip.

"No," Luella breathed.

He was here.

And she realized where she had heard that noise from.

Ground shaking from the booming force of what she now knew as the beating of a dragon's wings, Luella watched the shadow of the creature as it flew right over the smithy she was hidden within. If it weren't for the hole above, she never would have seen the shadowed outline.

King Vale had come for her.

And he brought the Prima and his pack of wild beasts to do his bidding.

Luella had never stood a chance in her escape.

Fingers pulled at her golden curls, knotting in her hair as she lamented every decision that brought her to this very moment.

Wingbeats in the sky shook the earth, thundering as the dragon soared.

It was so loud, and her attention was so caught up on things above that she forgot to keep in mind the things down below.

As the dragon passed by and the boom of wings receded slightly, her breathing grew harsher. But there was an odd undertone to it. A deeper replica. Labored breaths puffing in time with her own.

Her eyes lowered to the heart of the smithy, her gaze landing on the furnace at the center of the room.

Nothing was there to make such a sound, but Luella had heard it.

She shifted on the rubble, boots creaking as her heel nudged a pile of ashen wood—met by a similar sound. The crunch of rock under feet that were much larger than her own.

Luella jerked her head to the source of the noise. To the far side of the room.

And stumbled back, back, back into the large chunks of stone and wooden beams behind her, ankle twisting in her boot.

A fae male stood, half-hidden in the darkness of the corner.

She couldn't see his eyes, but his clothes were in tatters, covered in soot and blood and dirt. He was huge. A silver sword glinted in his hands as he shifted, stepping out of the darkness and into the faint light that cascaded through the open hole above.

His face was calm. Too calm for such a situation. Eyes of some strange color took her in—too dark for her to see clearly—and the male's amber-hued hair was shorn close to his skull. Cheekbones smeared with dirt and old blood, and the hollows of his face prominent. The male's lip twitched up as he regarded her.

She couldn't understand it, how he was so unmoving.

He was victim to whatever attack had felled this village—this mysterious Umbra that had brought such destruction.

Luella took a step forward, his head shifting to track her. The action was strangely predatory.

She held her hands before her, grip loosening around the dagger as she tried to placate the stranger in front of her. "It’s okay," she said. "I’m on your side. I won’t hurt you."

The male let out a soft laugh. It was low and throaty. She looked down at her tattered clothes. Matted and wild hair. Features too soft to harm anyone. He was likely amused that she thought herself capable of being a threat.

"I know you won’t," the strange male uttered. Luella startled at the gruff sound of his voice.

It was so quiet in this place. The air thrummed with something ancient, and it was then that Luella started to feel uneasy.

He took a step forward, and she took a step back, heel bumping the largest piece of stone, the beginnings of an upward slant that led straight to the gaping hole in the roof.

Her eyes scoured the room, searching for Az, but he was long gone, left to fight off the pack of wolves—a fruitless endeavor. They were never going to win.

A few more steps, while Luella stayed frozen with fear; he was close now, could easily reach out and grab her if he wished.

Something prickled against her leg. Looking down, she saw snaking vines growing out of cracks in the foundation, curling around her boots and twining up to her calves, further to her knees and past her thighs.

Terra magic.

Slowly, her eyes met the male’s. He was right before her. As the haze of smoke drifted above, letting in a bit more light, she was able to see his eyes for the first time.

Mottled green overtaken by the darkness, like a shadow blocking out the sun.

She had seen eyes like that before. In the gardens of Serpentis, Treye, who had tried to—

Her thoughts broke off as she shuddered, the male before her smirking in a mocking remembrance of the one from her memory. Treye had seemed so off, but Luella hadn’t been able to put her finger on it. Had been too

caught up in everything to look deeper and pay attention to what was happening around her.

If only she had noticed.

Howls picked up outside, but the sound of the dragon’s wings grew fainter.

"We’re on the same side," Luella breathed, gripping the dagger with renewed force. The rough make of the hilt bit into her palm, but she found it grounding.

The blade of his sword dipped, the pointed tip digging into the ground as the male lowered his hand. He seemed utterly without a care, even as she lifted her own blade and held it out with a shaky hand.

His body was muscular, his frame large, but he did not have the look of a warrior; he held the blade awkwardly like it was something foreign.

"And what side is that, Princess Luella?" He cocked a red-hued brow.

"I—" She didn’t know. "How do you know my name?"

He grew pleased at her stumbling falter but did not answer her. There was so much unknown to her, and everyone realized it.

Another shake made her balance off-kilter, and Luella fell back against the rubble, shoulder hitting it harshly. Her feet were still planted on the ground, but her torso was elevated by the slanted stone, the position made him appear even more frightening. And he seemed to love her fear, evident in the way a wicked smirk curled up his lips, the sharp angles of his face growing deeper as he took another small step closer, the toes of his boots brushing against hers.

Before she could do anything—*scream*, even—a hand shot out, curling against her windpipe. Luella clawed against him, but it was like a vice around her throat. His other hand gripped her wrist, forcing the dagger to clatter against the stone, bouncing off of the piles of rubble and falling somewhere far out of reach.

"How does it feel?" he asked, hand flexing around her throat.

She shook her head, unable to answer.

The male continued, "To be powerless. Helpless." He squeezed. "*He* wants you unharmed but understands if force has to be used to acquire you. We love a fight."

Luella struggled against him, knees rising up as she planted both her feet against his stomach and kicked with all her might. Her ankle burned with pain, and the male let out a howl, stumbling back, hand still locked

around her and tugging against her neck. She gagged as she felt her skin bruise nearly to the point of being crushed.

Her empty hands scrambled on the stone, searching for something. Anything. A chunk of rock, the size of her hand. Her fingertips tingled with adrenaline as she got hold of it.

Then, Luella swung.

The rock hit the side of the male’s face, a harsh blow that caused blood to spray against her neck and chest. None hit her face. She turned her head just in time, eyes squeezed shut as she flinched away.

Hands released her as he staggered back, pressing a palm to his cheek. "Fuck you." He spat drops of blood to the ground. "You little heirus bitch."

She didn’t waste time. Precious moments, the rock had bought her.

Legs kicking up and scrambling against the rubble, she crawled up on her hands and knees, sharp points piercing her skin in her haste. Her thighs burned as she dragged herself up the incline, smoke-filled air making her eyes water as her head broke through the hole.

The wind whipped her face, and she heaved as she pulled herself up, legs working to propel her body forward as she finally came to the rooftop of the smithy.

She had nowhere else to flee to. And as she stood, looking around the wasteland of the village—she now knew to be in Terra based upon the fae male’s magic—Luella only felt dread.

What must have been a hundred bodies crawled throughout the depths of the village. Wielding swords or magic teeming at their fingertips. Where had they all come from? Had they been there this whole time, waiting for someone to stumble into their village, only to attack…

Hair tickled her cheeks as she tipped her head back.

There, in the sky, a pure onyx dragon. Like the night itself.

Luella’s cloak whipped around her as she stood tall on the top of the building, weaponless and hopeless.

A groan from behind her, and she turned her head with resignation. The male pulled himself up, hopping from a crouch to a stand as he prowled before her.

"We love a chase," he taunted. "But know when to concede. It grows tiring, having to chase you all over."

She stumbled back a step, the edge of the building looming to her side. It wasn’t that far of a drop. Luella could do it if she had to, at the expense of

a few broken bones, most likely. But it wouldn’t kill her.

Just as he lifted the sword, poised to strike this time, Luella saw a flash of white below. A wolf. Just one.

Had Az succeeded in killing the rest?

The snarling maw and gnashing teeth of the wolf froze her to her spot, shoulders curled up and whole body quivering.

She didn’t want to die.

The male charged, and in a fit of desperation, Luella ducked.

Rolling on the ground, her ribs and shoulders bit into the harshness of fallen glass and chunks of debris. A few tiny pieces cut into her cheeks and palms, but she barely noticed, not as she scooted further away, the male teetering on the edge of the building. Right where she had just been.

As quick as a blink, he was gone. Falling over and down, right to the ground where the awaiting maw of the white wolf tore into him with a vicious snarl. He screamed, and it was such a barbarous sound that her ears rang.

Utterly brutal, the noises of flesh and bone being torn to shreds from a breathing victim, laced with the sounds of his screams of agony.

Luella knew she shouldn’t look, but she did anyway.

Crawling to the side of the building, her hands curled around the ledge as she looked down. Luella grew sick at the sight; it was far worse than the noises. Ribbons of flesh decorated the ground, and the white coat of the wolf grew gore-soaked as he feasted. Intestines trailed out of the male’s stomach, and he lifted a pale, weak hand toward her. Even as he was so distraught and taken by overwhelming pain, he grinned. A small, fleeting thing, but there nonetheless. The hand dropped, and the shadows within his eyes grew dim and dull with death.

It was over.

She swallowed, other sounds coming back to her in waves, more than just the noise of a still-feasting beast.

Luella’s breaths were ragged. "I killed him." Her words, meek. "*I killed him*."

A spiral of self-hatred and all-consuming anguish threatened to drown her. And it would have, if not for the faintest cawing of a bird that made her head whip up to the source.

Her eyes blazed with hatred and sorrow.

Perched upon the ledge of the building, wings fluttering in the harsh wind—the smoke made his pure black coat appear a deep blue, shades of grey mixing with pitch.

Her hands scrambled against the ground, and she picked up a small pebble. Before she could think it through, she hurled it at the raven.

"I hate you!" Luella screamed. "I hate you," she sobbed. "Look at what you've made me do. Look at what you've turned me into." Every word she spat was a volley of righteous misery.

She mourned who she used to be. No blood on her hands.

Now, her palms were forever stained with it.

The raven hopped along the ledge, head cocked as those bright blue eyes stayed trained on her.

She knew it was *him*. Knew it without a shadow of a doubt.

The watcher, come to watch her as she broke down.

Her fingers splayed out on the rocks below her as she sat crumpled on the roof. The wolf was still feasting with ugly, wet sounds. As she looked down, she saw maroon stained against the backs of her hands, but Luella blinked, and it was gone.

Her teeth clacked against each other as she shook.

"I'm a k-killer. A…" Luella sobbed. "A monster."

Her head hung low, frizzed, golden hair blocking out her view as she focused on her hands, turning them to trace over her palms, seeing red where she knew there was not any. It was all in her head. But never would she be able to rid herself of the life she had taken.

A gloved finger joined hers, brushing over the lines etched into her palm. "You're not a monster."

She couldn't force her head to move, to look up. But she didn't have to.

Graves notched his thumb under her chin and lifted her face up to his.

He knelt on one knee, brows drawn low over his eyes of lapis lazuli. He searched her face, and her eyes trailed to the side, unbidden, called to the sound of a slowing feast.

"No, no. Don't do that, sweetheart," Graves ordered, tone imbued with a rare softness.

Tears welled in Luella's eyes as she uttered, "I killed him."

She couldn't think past the litany of remorse swirling within her. Even though it was self-defense. Even though he would've killed her—or worse.

Like they weren’t her own, her hands rested against Graves’s chest, curling into the fabric of his dark cloak. She felt so small. So weak.

Luella watched him as he watched her.

Graves shifted, and his hand flexed against her cheek. He looked conflicted but seemed to settle on something, that confliction turning to a weighted conviction within mere moments.

Warm lips pressed fiercely against hers.

Luella started, broken out of her shocked stupor by the feel of Graves’s lips.

It was chaste, his lips slightly chapped, but somehow, everything she didn’t even know she needed.

As quick as the kiss had begun, it ended. The raven shifter pulled away and rested his forehead against hers.

"Okay?" Graves breathed against her skin.

She shook her head, murmuring a soft, "Why?"

"Physical touch can be a distraction," Graves said. "Take what you need from me."

Her hands smoothed over his chest, and suddenly, she didn’t feel so lost.

Graves seemed to sense this, and he helped her stand, jaw clenching when she winced as her ankle throbbed.

"What happened?"

"I twisted it," she supplied. Luella didn’t mention that it was while fleeing—the fact an undeniable truth hanging heavily between them.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Gloved hands skimmed over her cheeks, down to her chest.

Luella quietly shook her head.

"Did he bite you?"

She pulled back, incredulity breaking through the shock. "B-bite me?" Her voice shook.

He rolled up her sleeves, the fabric sliding over to elbows as he checked her for any wounds—*bite marks*, her mind corrected.

Graves gripped her chin with gloved fingers, turning her head to inspect her. He eyed the blood on her chest. "Is this blood yours?"

"His…" Luella weakly replied.

She had another male’s blood on her, staining her. A shiver coursed through her, and Graves’s hands grew gentler on her body as he finished checking her, brushing a finger over the tiny pieces of rock and debris stuck

in her cheek; she winced as he dislodged it, soothing the abrasions with a whisper of air puffed through lips she knew to be as warm and inviting as a cup of tea on a cold day.

He tore a strip from the bottom of his cloak, bringing it to his face and uttering a soft, "Sorry."

Graves spat on the strip, wetting it with his saliva, before dragging it roughly over the blood on her neck and chest, cleaning it from her skin.

She grimaced. Not from his spit but from the rough drag of the fabric turning her pale skin red and mottled from the force of his furious cleaning. Almost like he couldn't stand the fae male's blood to stain her, just as she couldn't. Like he hated the taint it left on her—the blight on her innocence.

As he pulled the strip of fabric away and dropped it to the ground, kicking rocks over it with his boot, Luella thought, *or something darker, something worse.*

He treated the blood like a disease.

She remembered the male's shadowed eyes, so similar to Treye's.

What if…

What if the blood *was* diseased?

The fae male had seemed so ordinary. Not a fighter. His body was not hewn with strength from battle training but from wielding sacks of grain and sowing fields. A simple fae. A brother, a son. Someone's lover.

Graves quickly kissed the crown of her hair, uncaring of the tangles and the sweat making her golden curls stick to her temples. Pulling the cowl back over his lower face, his words were muffled as he said, "We must go now."

The raven shifter looked out at the mass below them, and she followed his gaze, only to find Tharen swinging his twin swords with glee, cutting a body right in half. The dismembered figure slumped, blood soaking the ground as the upper half fell in a sickly, wet thump, so grotesque and loud it stood out above the cacophony of battle. And as the mage turned and barked something, the crowd shifted, and she saw who he was speaking to.

Az grinned ferally as he swept his stolen sword against an attacker's thigh in a low arc. The male shouted and fell to the ground, and Tharen charged, jabbing a perfectly crafted sword right into his heart.

Together, they were magnificent. Fierce and powerful. Az's brute strength and savagery combined with Tharen's skill—the mage used a combination of armed combat and magic to slay the fae around them.

Graves helped her back down to the ground, never letting her go. And they ventured into the midst of battle.

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THE SECOND BATTLE PT. 2

"This way," Graves called.

Luella followed in his footsteps as the raven shifter led her to the heart of the village, right where Az and Tharen stood proudly amidst their defeated foes, the mage wiping blood off his blades with the edge of his shirt. Sweat dotted both of their brows, but they didn't seem tired, if anything, they appeared rejuvenated. The soft and resigned exhaustion that had marred Az's features the last few days was gone, replaced by wild fury.

The last few enemies dropped, Az knocking the hilt of his sword against Tharen's shoulder in a strange camaraderie. It seemed out of place here in the middle of this bloodied space. Too familiar.

A circle of fallen bodies lined the village center, and Graves barreled right through, Luella stumbling behind, tripping over errant limbs and discarded weapons.

She swallowed thickly, smoke clouding her sight. Lifeless eyes were all around, littering the dirty, hard ground. A female with gaunt cheeks, one hand outstretched as she lay dead; her eyes were slanted open and a grizzly, gaping wound was cut into her neck. A male with his leg sliced clean off, blood coating every bit of him where he lay slumped against the side of a crumbled building. She saw white bone peaking out where his leg should have been, red fleshy pieces hanging from the stump in tatters.

Luella shuddered. Graves tightened his hold on her.

Vultures cawed overhead, already preparing to descend and feast.

Az dropped his sword at the sight of her, both of them bloodied and bruised.

"Lu." The demon stumbled forward, wrapping her up in his strong arms.

She nosed along his chest. He smelled sweaty, and she detected the faintest tinge of iron blood that marred his clothes, likely from the few cuts littering his tanned skin—a rather deep gash on his forearm, which she viewed with trembling lips. Luella didn’t care that his blood mingled with hers, little smudges smearing over her already dirt-lined skin as he held her face between his hands.

Luella was safe.

A hand settled on her nape.

"Little lamb," Tharen intoned, pulling her roughly away from Az and keeping her pinned with hands on her shoulders. "You ran from me."

Her mouth parted, and she met Tharen’s icy eyes, attention snagging on droplets of blood against the sharp points of his cheeks and the line of his jaw. Her whole body shook.

The memory of Graves’s lips against hers was fleeting under the harshness of the raven shifter’s stare, where he watched from the sidelines. Watching her wrapped up in the mage, watching as she tried to cower back into Az. Always watching.

"And I would do it again," she said, utterly soft, words broken with a whimper but *true*. And truth always did have a way of snaking its way into the light.

The mage grew pensive and leaned down, face a mere breath away. Tharen’s nose swept down the length of hers, tickling against her jaw and down to her neck as he inhaled raggedly. A groan escaped him. "Even coated in blood, you smell fucking divine. Even mouthing off"—he brushed his nose over the bow of her lips—"you sound delectable."

Before she could respond, or say *something*, all three males looked up in unison, right toward the knoll, barely in sight from the fallen buildings around them and the thick smoke lingering in the air.

Tall and proud, a pure white steed graced the top of the hill, another pure black steed slightly behind it.

Reins held in strong, powerful hands, pulling back and forcing the horse to come to a stuttering stop.

Luella’s eyes drifted up and up, right to the faint visage of regality perched upon the back of the white steed. King Vale—no longer a dragon—had come to take her away. And on the horse, black as night, Bastian.

The smoke filtered over them, making their faces hard to discern, but she knew the exact moment they called their steeds onward, racing down the knoll and into the village. Out of sight. But not for long.

She heard thundering hooves against stone; the sound was a muted twin of his dragon wings as they had beat above earlier. No matter how King Vale chose to arrive, he always did so deafeningly.

The horses stopped before them, and the King and the Advisor dismounted with ease.

Luella couldn’t stop herself from staggering back until she could no longer move. Hands against her shoulders kept her steady and still. She would be forced to endure whatever the King would make her face.

Punishment.

Her lower lip wobbled, and she couldn’t help the whimper that escaped her.

Green eyes glinted through a haze of lingering smoke and ash as King Vale approached her, Bastian on his heels.

The King was without his crown, and the sight was so strange. The unpolished look fit him. Scruff lined his jaw, hair wild, and eyes even more so. He looked so savage, broken down to the basal nature of a possessive beast.

Bastian didn’t look any better; the vampire looked out of sorts, less the sensual and put-together creature she knew him as and more of a haggard and vicious, blood-driven thing.

The King drew closer, and Luella flinched away, Tharen’s hands on her shoulders keeping her from cowering fully.

"Luella." King Vale said her name like an answered prayer.

She looked up at him, and he took her face in his hands. Two scorchingly hot palms pressed against her cheeks, turning her head this way and that as the King scoured her whole body.

When King Vale found Luella unharmed—or as unharmed as she could be, save the shake of her limbs and her too-pale face lined with scratches from gravel and flakes of her dried blood—he took her into him, enveloping her with his strong arms and firm body.

His hand cradled her head, pressing her face into his chest. She was rigid against him.

"Luella, *Luella*," King Vale uttered, the mark of a possessive dragon as he held her to him. He smelled of still-burning smoke. "Never leave me again." Both a threat and a plea.

She looked up, bewildered. The King was wild, and he held her with a dominating strength like he had been starved of her.

"You've had enough to sate your dragon's possessiveness, Vale," Bastian announced, tugging her from the King, who let her go with reluctance, hands staying on her as long as he could before the vampire took her in his icy grip—so different from the King's unnatural warmth of hidden dragon flame.

Bastian smoothed his fingers over her cheeks, rubbing away the smears of dirt and blood. He shook his head, black silky hair falling over his temple.

"Dragons do not fare well when their hoards are taken from them." Bastian breathed in deeply, tapping a finger over the scratch on her cheek, then picking up her hand and drawing a line over the abrasions on her palms.

She barely thought of how her blood was on her skin, and he was a vampire who looked primed to tear into her.

"This is the only blood that is yours." The vampire sounded relieved, but he spoke to the others and not her. As if reassuring them she was relatively unharmed.

Bastian sucked his thumb into his mouth, wetting it before wiping away more of the blood and dirt on her skin, eyes lined with red from the faint taste of her essence on his tongue. Luella leaned into the touch, starved for anything to break up the haze of disbelief. With every soothing touch, she grew more steady, as if awakening from a deep sleep. Or a nightmare.

"Oh, pet," Bastian crooned. "You never should have left." He looked away from her to where Az was standing by Tharen. "And you never should have fed into her illusions of freedom. You knew it would never happen, but you still went along with it. Still helped her."

Az didn't seem cowed by the vampire's angered words, for he stood his ground and said, "How could I resist? I've always been the one to fight for her, even over you."

Bastian scoffed, lifting a hand to rub against his chest. The black material of his shirt pulled down from his searching touch, and she glimpsed the faintest hint of black swirling ink on the pale skin of his chest.

As they spoke, she grew more weary, her ankle throbbing from how she stood on it. She wanted to rest.

"I fought. But unlike *you*, demon, I know when to choose my battles. I know how to wait." Luella shifted, leaning into the vampire’s side. He locked an arm around her waist, humming under his breath. "And it looks like it worked," Bastian taunted.

Az growled deeply, and only Tharen’s strength—hands quickly reaching to grab Az’s upper arms—kept the demon from stalking forward.

Luella placed a hand on Bastian’s chest, pushing away from him, he allowed her to go but kept a hand notched against her side, a short leash that kept her tethered close to him.

"Nothing worked," she managed. "I escaped because I could not stand to be held captive any longer. And believe me when I say I would do it all over again. The only thing I regret is that you found me."

"You’ll be punished for this, pet." Bastian ground his jaw.

King Vale grew rigid beside them, affirming, "Absolutely." A glint in his eye.

Az struggled against Tharen’s hold, and her eyes flicked to Graves, who stood nearby, silent, as he polished a knife with the edge of his cloak. His hood was over his head, obscuring his features.

The raven shifter seemed to bloom in her presence, but around the others, he was back to his one-worded quips and simple statements.

"Oh, demon, she’ll like it," Bastian said. He skimmed a hand down to her backside, fingers skimming over her hips.

Luella jerked away, insistent this time to be let go. Her ankle rolled in her boot, and she yelped at the sharp lance of pain.

Bastian grew rigid.

"What hurts?" King Vale stepped to her, nearly crazed, as he braced a hand on her shoulder to help her.

"My ankle," Luella gritted out, shrugging his touch off.

Something dark sparked in the King’s eyes at her dismissive actions, but before she could investigate further, Graves finally stepped in.

The King held back his brutish persona with a struggle, eyes never straying far from hers—even when he looked to the others, it was never for

long. A roiling storm of green called to fall on her like the inevitability of the stars that dotted the night sky.

"Go sit," the raven shifter ordered.

With reluctance, Az interjected, "We'll have to go back to… Serpentis." He flexed his muscles, jerking out of the mage's hold. "A healer can look at her there."

Tharen smirked, an utterly wild thing, as his tongue darted out to lick along his bottom lip. "I'll look at her." Eyes of pure ice fell over Luella's frame as she leaned heavily against chunks of rubble, sitting down without grace, her injured leg outstretched and features pinched in pain. "I can examine her in my apothecary." The way he stressed the word, *examine*, made it known that the examination in question would not be strictly professional.

Bastian shook his head. "Not alone. You know better."

Petulant, the mage knocked a fist against Az's shoulder.

Children, the lot of them.

Even as Az's words expressed reluctance to go back to Serpentis, something in his body language gave away that he was not as unhappy about it as he seemed—his posture was too open, eyes not as weary and dull as they had been deep in the caves of the Silva Noctis.

It was almost as though he was glad not to have her in his care alone. They were similar in that regard, forced to be alone from circumstances but forever left wanting more.

Graves absently rubbed a gloved finger over the chain of his amulet, and Luella watched the faint swirls of white trapped within the purple stone. He was always so reserved, so reticent in sharing. She knew of the others and their place in King Vale's circle, but Graves was forever a mystery to her. An enigma of the darkest sort.

She remembered what Az had shared with her—the raven shifter had secrets. But he would share them with Luella. It looked as though she would have the chance to ask now.

Head thumping against the back of a stone building, part of it crumbling and broken, keeping the inside hidden from view, Luella let her eyes flutter shut.

She didn't want to *look* anymore. Not at the mass of dead bodies, not at the gore and violence that coated the grounds, and not at the red blood that stained her palms.

Snarling howls made her pause, and Luella slowly opened her eyes.

Tharen’s trio of wolves padded into the village square, sniffing the bodies that decorated the ground and licking bright blood from their maws.

Her hands gripped the rubble underneath her, and a tremor wracked her frame as she huddled against the stone.

Bastian was the closest to her, and the vampire looked at her as the wolves prowled closer. "Scared?" he asked.

Her tongue was heavy in her mouth; Luella merely nodded.

Graves knew. He knew why she was so fearful of the beasts. He shifted closer to her, standing partly in front of her body. He still kept his distance, they all did, leaving her to curl on hardened stone—little pieces of someone’s home, now her place of rest.

"You should be," Tharen called. He reached down to stroke a hand down the smaller wolf’s coat, the beast preening under his master’s touch.

King Vale cleared his throat. "The Umbra has come further than we thought."

"The scouts never reported they were this far into Terra," Bastian said, placing a hand on his hip. He looked down at the bodies around them, expression grim.

"The Umbra," Luella spoke up.

All eyes looked toward her.

Hesitantly, she continued, "I thought… I thought the Umbra was a person."

Graves adjusted his cowl. "The Umbra is many. Not just one."

"An entity," Bastian supplied at her look of confusion.

"The Umbra has invaded not just our lands but every kingdom. No place is safe from its touch. Turning brother against brother." King Vale gestured to the destroyed village around them. Fae bodies—male and female, old and young. Luella swallowed thickly. "It is a disease upon our lands. One for which there is no cure."

A hand fluttered to her throat, ghosting over the memory of thick blood splattered against her neck and chest, the way Graves had been so quick to clean her of it.

"How?" Luella asked, chin trembling. "How did I not know?"

Too many questions. Far too many to discuss amid such death.

Bastian seemed to be privy to her thoughts. Maybe he was. How was Luella to know how Mind magic worked? If there was a disease spread

throughout all the kingdoms, hidden from her for her whole life, everything else she had ever known could also be a lie…

Tears burned the back of her eyes.

It was all making sense. Partly, at least. The secrets, the maze of lies. The way her maids at Solis treated her with such resentment; the hidden conversations from her parents, hushed words harshly whispered, abruptly stopping whenever she entered the room.

What else?

What else was a lie?

They talked, and she listened. Words cascading over her, not truly understanding, not truly listening.

Luella was too grief-stricken—too overcome by a haze of pressing shock—that she could not sift through the meaning of their words.

And that shock was what caused her to miss it.

A soft crackling from behind her like footsteps crunching slowly over stone.

She watched the King and his circle, entirely wrapped up with each other. Luella was alone, tucked in the beginnings of shadows created by the half-broken pieces of crumbling structures.

Leaving plenty of opportunity for a lonesome watcher to pounce.

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PRICKED BY POISON

The smallest of Tharen's wolves let out a low growl, joined in time by the other two, their hackles raised as they readied themselves to pounce. Gleaming eyes trained right over Luella's shoulder.

Luella turned, the action was slow from her exhaustion.

And five sets of possessive eyes fell on her.

Shock marred Tharen's usually stoic features. A braid hit the side of his cheek as he whipped his head, a hand searching behind him for one of the swords strapped to his back.

It happened quickly.

From the shadows of the fallen buildings, a fae leaped out.

A female.

Her hair was matted with grease, and she barely had any fat on her bones. But that wasn't what made fear grip Luella's throat and constrict her lungs.

It was the briefest flash of shadowed eyes that caused Luella to scramble back, foot twisting anew.

"*Luella*!" Graves shouted, his gruff voice was a loud boom that resonated within the quiet destruction of the village center.

But it was too late.

Green, twining vines shot out from the fae female's hands as she let out a snarling scream. The vines curled around Luella's ankle and tugged her back. Luella fell to the ground, elbows thudding as she tried to catch

herself. Her stomach dagged over rubble, and she yelped from the pain. The female behind her did not relent.

In a whirlwind, the Umbra struck. A small, bloodied dagger was clutched in between thin fingers, and quick as a coiled snake, the Umbra struck the point of the blade right down onto Luella's heart.

Luella gasped, rolling to the side. Her eyes squeezed shut.

No.

The blade struck Luella's upper arm before it glanced off the rocks near her side, falling from the Umbra's hands.

Sharp, white-hot pain lanced from the cut, and Luella gasped.

The female jerked back, a shake to her limbs. Exhausted and hungry. Luella could see it in her eyes. She was nearly dead anyway. And that meant she was desperate, controlled by the *disease* gripping her, willing to do anything…

Tendrils of pain continued to lick up Luella's arm, and she clutched a palm over the wound. Blood seeped between her fingers, a slow trickle. It was neither deep nor deadly. But then, why did it feel so agonizing?

Her breathing was heavy in her ears.

Everything had been so slow but suddenly roared to life.

Curses rang behind her.

The Umbra pressed her back to the side of the building, eyes downturned. She was waiting for her death. For punishment.

Luella stared up at the dimming sky, still clouded with smoke.

Warm palms snapped her out of her haze as Az rested his hands on her shoulders and helped her rise.

"…okay?" She barely noticed Az speak, too stunned to do anything but lean against him.

Luella may have nodded, but she was not sure. It was all surreal. She felt too small to be contained by her skin. Everything narrowed down to that lancing pain in her arm.

The demon's hands notched against her waist, and she forced her body to cooperate. Luella leaned into the demon heavily, a sudden shiver making her curl into him for warmth. Bastian and Az crowded around her, and between the spaces of their bodies, she watched the Umbra's demise.

The King had come to avenge Luella's near death.

Tharen threw one of his long, curved swords through the air, King Vale grabbing it by the hilt with expert precision.

With a vengeance, the King struck.

A sharp gust of air from the mage's outstretched palms forced the Umbra back against the wall, held in an invisible cage made from his Aer magic. Graves was a shadow, every bit of skin concealed as he charged toward the female, gloved fingers wrapping around her throat.

Her hair was the shade of a typical Terra fae—golden red—and the strands were sticky with blood, falling against her dirt-streaked skin. She could not have been much older than Luella, a mere heirus.

Luella's heart seized, chills seeping throughout her as Az removed the hand that was still pressed against her arm to look at her wound. But Luella couldn't look away from the Umbra, not even as Az murmured a curse.

Something clinked, and her eyes drifted to watch as Bastian weighed the blade the fae had used in his hands, sorrow weighing down his brow as red-tinged eyes shifted to the bloodied dagger in his grip, to where Luella was caught in the demon's arms. Az almost held her up completely as she listed to the side, unable to keep herself steady.

Old blood stained the blade in Bastian's grip, congealed and crusty, while shining, red liquid dripped from the tip, mingling with the ichor. Her blood mixed with whatever ungodsly type that coated the blade.

King Vale wielded his sword with a snarl.

And then…

Plunged.

The tip of the blade pierced the female's chest, and she let out a cry, somewhere between relieved and pained. Her suffering was almost over.

Luella's fingers dug into Az's arm.

She shifted, her cheek brushing over his warm chest. Her ankle didn't hurt so much anymore.

King Vale jerked the blade by the hilt, cutting the female's stomach right down the middle. Graves's firm grip around the Umbra's shoulders was the only thing keeping her upright. Even as blood and guts pooled from the hole in her stomach, he did not falter nor abate in his quest for vengeance.

The raven shifter looked to be an angel of death. But wrapped up in the darkness of his cloak, helping to avenge her, maybe he was more akin to one of the fallen.

Luella never saw the Umbra's last breath.

Her bleary eyes shifted from the scene at the sound of wheezing breaths.

The labored breathing was too close to be from the dying female.

Far, far too close.

Luella stumbled, her head was fuzzy.

She didn’t feel—

Woah.

Her boot slipped against a crumbled stone, and Luella blinked furiously to clear the fog that threatened to overtake her vision.

She tilted to the side, and this time, Az did not catch her; cold hands helped to ease her as she was lowered the rest of the way to the ground. Bastian and Az crouched over her, the demon’s hands shook as he smoothed her hair back from her brow.

She barely felt his touch.

Everything was spinning. And her limbs felt awkward, too heavy for her body. None of this was right.

"Az," Luella breathed. But her voice sounded strange. Shaky and thin.

Through muted hearing, the faint sound of crunching alerted her to a new presence.

The others stood above her, all wearing similar expressions of fear and…

Grief.

That was grief lining the wild regalness of King Vale’s face; grief softening the hard edges of Tharen’s jaw and the hollows of his cheeks; grief that made Graves’s gloved hands shake as he roughly shoved his hood back, only to reveal eyes of the deepest blue, swirling with an ocean of feeling.

The corners of Graves’s dark lashes were wet with tears as the raven shifter took a knee.

Darkness crowded her vision, and when she opened her eyes again—a soft, weary flutter that felt too difficult to manage—she saw a face swimming before her, the features murky.

His mouth moved, but Luella could not make out the words.

"Tharen," Luella forced out between clumsy, numb lips.

Tharen pressed a hand against her brow, and her eyes closed again.

Something sharp stung against her cheek, and she felt nearly cross-eyed as she opened her lids and looked up at him. Through a cloud of sudden and bitter cold, she realized the mage had slapped her.

Soft, murmured voices soothed Luella, in memory of lullabies whispered between iron bars.

She blinked. King Vale was above her.

Luella lifted a weak hand and touched his face gently. She smoothed a finger clumsily over the line of his jaw, up to his cheek. It was a constant push and pull between them—the captive Princess and her captor, the King. Just this once, Luella wanted to give in to the *pull* and refuse the urge to push him away.

"I don’t… want to die." Her chin trembled. "Please don’t let me die."

She wanted to live, to unearth all the secrets that were just out of reach.

To adventure, to learn, to love… And be loved.

She had thought she was ready. Thought she didn’t care. But now that death was standing before her, Luella wanted to run far away.

Icy tendrils licked through her fingertips and curled up her veins, freezing every piece of her.

"You’re not going to die," King Vale hissed. "I won’t allow it."

He said something then, mouth quickly moving as he turned his head to speak to Tharen, but she didn’t quite catch it.

Everything was going in and out of focus.

And thick ice was sweeping through her, radiating like a snowstorm from the cut on her arm.

Luella did not know anything else but the pain.

Ice and pain. Pain and ice.

It was cold. And dark.

And she felt alone. Even surrounded by the very males who took everything from her.

Warmth broke through the chill as hands cupped her cheeks, forcing her eyes to open. Luella didn’t realize she had closed them.

King Vale’s head of golden hair was ruffled in the wind. Without his crown, he was more like her.

At that, Luella’s lips gave a small twitch. At least before she died, she would be able to see him like this—disheveled and almost normal. As normal as someone like him could be.

Her golden eyes shifted to the sky behind him, looking up at the glorious expanse above, still tinged with smoke.

The purple of twilight mingled with the haze, and countless stars dotted the sky. It was beautiful. She was glad to see something so precious, to hold

it in her memory.

She drew in a small breath, her exhale even more faint.

A cacophony of voices, drowned out by the roaring in her ears and the rushing of ice in her veins.

Her body was moved, but Luella did not feel it.

Even as a tiny echo of something great welled deep within her stomach.

And Luella…

Blinked.

A hand patted against her cheek, a face in front of her. This time, she couldn’t make out who it was as her head lolled to the side like a mere doll. More voices. Fingertips pressed against her arm, lifting her cold hand from where it rested limply on her stomach.

She barely felt anything save the vivid tug of tiny threads that pulled her in every direction. A groan escaped her, barely a sound, fallen from pale lips.

"Open your eyes," whispered over her face, little breaths fluttering her eyelashes and ruffling the tendrils of curls that fell against her temples.

She couldn’t. No matter how hard she tried.

As the ice cascaded through Luella, her soul warred against it, refusing to relent, even though she was so tired—desired nothing more than to give up, give in, and find relief.

The threads yanked and tugged. Her back nearly bowed off the ground from the forceful pulls.

She felt like she was being torn into a thousand different pieces, pulled in different directions, her soul fighting against an unnamed enemy.

A ghostly life, not even a full memory, but jagged fragments scattered all around. In the wind, within a canopy of trees, a body of water, embers of a fire, under the night sky, and the morning sun.

Within this final, soft memory of a half-life, Luella knew no more.

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GRAVES

Graves felt rage.

And sorrow at the memory of the words still ringing in his ears…

As the raven shifter knelt over the one he knew would change everything—had already changed everything—he clenched his hands into a fist, fucking lamenting every decision that had brought them to this point.

The godsdamned Fates.

He scoffed.

Fuck the Fates, and fuck their prophecies. Always interfering.

His gloves crinkled as he flexed his fingers, one hand punched into the ground and the other resting on a mass of dirtied, golden curls.

Her.

The *fae Princess* was limp on the ground, and the sound of vengeance permeated the hazy air of destruction that lingered within the village center.

And Graves stayed silent. Like he always did. Angered, like he always was.

Hopeless, like he often felt—especially as of late.

Luella's eyes were closed as he watched her, her features pinched in pain as she fought off the shadows coursing through her. All because of that blade the female Umbra had used—coated in poisoned Umbra blood, perfect for turning unsuspecting villagers into one of their own.

The dark clothes the Princess wore were rumpled and torn, her cloak askew, and the neckline of her blouse underneath stretched, revealing ashen

skin that he yearned to touch. She was so small, so slight, and utterly broken.

And it was all their fault.

Voices rang, and Graves cast his sharp, dark blue eyes to the dead Umbra who had dared to touch what belonged to them. The female was a small thing, golden red hair thin and tangled, her features not yet matured—an heirus, just like the one on the ground before him. The one that they were all tethered to.

The Tenebrae had reached this village—*and more*, Graves was sure. They were always too fucking late. And as he looked at the Umbra on the ground, her guts spilled and eyes forever stuck in an expression of pained relief, Graves only felt angry he could not hurt her some more. Hurt them all. Make the Tenebrae fucking sweat and feel heat nipping at *his* heels for trying to take their little captive from them.

Graves clenched his jaw.

He thought it was safe to send his Umbra to do his bidding, tucked away in Luna, as he was…

Soon, Graves vowed. Soon, they would show that godsdamned bastard that they, for once, had the upper hand, that they would win and have all the power.

All those nights Graves had watched her… He wanted to do more than stay outside her window and act as a mere voyeur. He wanted *in*. In her heart. In her mind. In her body. And he wouldn't stop until he had all of her.

They got to her first, after all.

A lazy grin slowly tugged on the corner of his mouth, right where a scar forever marred his skin—a gift from the bastard that threatened to take their Princess.

The rush of frenzied voices cut through the slight ringing in his ears, and Graves pulled his attention away from the Umbra on the ground.

Vale gripped Luella's cheeks. "Look at me. *Open your eyes*!" he bellowed, over and over.

Graves wondered if Vale felt so fiercely about her death because he wanted her power or because he wanted her.

His lip curled even as he blinked away a few tears burning white hot behind his eyes.

No. He couldn't show weakness. Especially not here.

Azgorath cradled the Princess’s head on his lap, and Graves watched as the demon soothed a shaking palm over her forehead, even as she whimpered, limbs twitching and contorting as she fought off the dark shadows that swept throughout her body. It was futile, Graves knew. No one had ever fought off the touch of the Tenebrae.

Tharen shoved Vale aside. "Move," the mage growled.

Vale raised a hand, smoke wafting from his nostrils. He was pissed, the rage of his dragon deadly. He looked like he wanted to burn the Prima to ash for thinking he could speak to him so rudely.

*Good luc*k, Graves thought bitterly.

There wasn’t a day that went by that one of them did not try to harm the other. Always in vain.

The Fates fucked with more than just their futures but their autonomy, robbing the five of them of their ability to kill or do serious harm to one another.

Their lives were intrinsically linked. Threads knotted around their souls, all five leading to the fae struggling on the ground. They circled her, orbiting her even when she was near death—when she was unaware.

If only the little captive knew…

Graves placed a hand on Luella’s chest. Her exposed skin was cold, even through his gloves.

"We—" Bastian cleared his throat, emotion making his voice thick. "We should go. Quickly."

Tharen knelt over Luella, power flaring in his hands as he searched her, using his demon-inherited ability of Body magic. Az seemed too distraught to do anything but card his blood-tinged, shaking hands through her curls and over her cheeks, too distraught to use his own power.

Graves held back a scoff. This was why the demon was a liability. He was too soft and too controlled by his heart.

Luella’s back bowed off the ground, Bastian pressing a hand to her shoulder to keep her steady as Tharen worked. Azgorath shushed her, head lowered and horns nearly poking Vale’s eye from how close they hovered over her.

Graves didn’t think he had seen the pair together without fighting since… *Before*.

"She’s fighting it," Tharen said. "Her heart is steady but slow."

Vale lifted a hand from the wound on her arm. If it wasn’t for the Umbra blood on the blade, she would have been fine. It was a smaller cut; it probably didn’t even need stitches.

But the Tenebrae always knew how to win, and an unsuspecting dagger used as a vessel to deliver infection—to finally get his hands on her and her power—was perfect in the eyes of a villain.

Her power.

It was a matter of time, really. Too bad they had got to her first to take control of that power.

"Bastian, call for a portal. *Now*," Vale barked.

Bastian closed his eyes, Mind magic flaring to life as he called one of their portal masters in Serpentis, demanding a portal to be opened for quick passage back to the castle—to Tharen’s apothecary.

Guess the mage would get his wish to look her over.

A large swirl of darkness bloomed to life amid the village, obscuring the dead bodies that littered the ground. Magic thrummed, and Graves stood, silently pulling his cowl up and hood back over his head.

He worked better in the shadows, anyway.

Vale gripped Luella’s waist, ordering, "Let me take her."

Azgorath hissed between his teeth, like a wildcat, tugging her back from away from Vale and keeping her closely bundled to him. "I’ve got her," the demon seethed. "You never wanted her anyway, just her power."

Bastian stood between them, a hand placed under the Princess’s head to keep her from knocking it against the rocks.

The vampire was soft with her.

Some small part of Graves wished he could be the same, but he was far past that now. Not after everything they had done.

"Now isn’t the time," Bastian urged. "One of you take her. We have to go."

Azgorath’s amber eyes flared as he implored the King, "Let me have this."

This—the small act of power of keeping their captive safe. But still, the demon didn’t beg.

Graves wondered if Azgorath would, even for *her*. The demon had risked everything for the promise of a female who didn’t even know he existed, but would he be able to utter the word, *please*?

Smoke leaked from Vale’s mouth as he snarled, but the dragon shifter relented, allowing Azograth to take Luella in his arms and cradle her to his chest.

Graves wanted her in *his* arms. He shook the thought away. Soft and gentle wasn’t for him. He wasn’t made for it. He was made for watching. For blood and violence and stealing secrets under the cover of night.

He adjusted his cowl, making sure it was pulled over his mouth; he trailed silently behind the others as they prepared to enter the portal, leaving everything behind in a flurry of *what-ifs.*

He knew nothing would be the same once they stepped through that portal.

Casting a look back over the destroyed village, Graves’s eyes fell on the Umbra slumped near the side of a crumbled piece of wall, half-shadowed in the dark, destined to lay there until her skin turned to ash and bones turned to dust.

The final words the female had uttered clung to him like thick smoke.

Vale had plunged the sword into her stomach, tearing a hole right through her and her possessed heart.

The shadows that had marred her green eyes had grown faint, life leaving her…

But not before she had whispered something, blood bubbling over her lips and staining her teeth crimson, as she looked right into Graves’s eyes. "*The Tenebrae will have her, Sorren*."

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THAREN

Glass shattered.

Tharen swept an arm over the table, bottles of liquid and empty vials and pieces of parchment crashing to the floor of his apothecary.

"Place her down here!" he barked.

Azgorath did as Tharen said, too overcome with fear to voice his displeasure with being ordered, no doubt.

Time had not changed any of them. Not in the least.

They were still as hot-headed and arrogant as the day when everything changed.

Tharen shoved the thoughts from his mind. He had to focus on his little lamb now.

And what a beautiful lamb she was. Even gripped by shadowed death.

The others crowded around them, looming over where Luella lay limply on the large wooden table. The light in his apothecary was dim as there was little natural light, and with a snap of his fingers, flame burst to life on the many scones fixed to the walls, casting shadows over the edges of the room. The small, rusted gasolier that swung above the worktable held many an unlit candle, but with a blink, orange light flickered to being.

The light made everything worse.

Tharen could see. See it all.

The blood that soaked the side of her arm, smudges of it on her pale cheeks and exposed skin. A large maroon handprint marred the side of her

face, right where Vale had attempted to jolt her back to wakefulness with a slap.

He could have gutted the dragon for it.

Even if Tharen loved the thought of hurting the Princess. He was the only one who could. Anyone else was asking for death by his blade if they laid a hand on her pretty skin.

Wishing it was Vale’s neck instead, Tharen gripped the clasp of Luella’s cloak and tore it from her body, then fit his hands on the neckline of her dark and dirtied blouse, giving it the same treatment. The fabric ripped jaggedly down to her stomach. An off-white, silken brassiere cupped her breasts, and Tharen wanted to rend it from her body, too. But he didn’t. He would leave her with that one small cover.

It was only a matter of time. He would see all of her eventually.

He could be a patient male—sometimes, at least.

Tharen brushed a hand softly down the swell of her chest, a deep groan threatening to tumble from his mouth, but he swallowed it down before it could escape.

From his side, Bastian reached in and aided him in removing her shirt, leaving her in only her brassiere and snug, black pants; they molded to her body, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Gods, she was small. She looked so breakable.

Tharen wondered if she would break easily. Something in him told him *no*. She was fiery; little embers burned within her. Only needed a hint of air to fan the flames and turn those embers into an inferno of fury.

"Back the fuck up." Tharen nudged Bastian away with his elbow, reaching up with his other arm to fix the candlelight overhead, directing it to shine down on the cut on Luella’s arm.

It was bad.

"Godsdammit," Vale hissed. The King ran a hand through his hair, disheveling the golden strands. The male was the most out-of-sorts Tharen had ever seen. And all because of some naive fae.

Azgorath echoed the curse with one of his own, a guttural cry muttered in the language of demons.

Bastian pinched the bridge of his nose, shoulders shaking as he forced himself to breathe steadily. "She smells so… enticing."

Tharen gave the vampire a weighted look. "Get out. I won’t have you eating my patient." He lifted Luella’s arm, and it was so light in his grip.

Turning it, he inspected the web of darkness that radiated from the cut. "Not yet, at least."

Azgorath growled low, and Tharen met his amber eyes, knowing his own were glowing faintly with unnatural blue.

"All of you," Tharen addressed. "If you cannot shut up and let me work, *get out*."

They all grew silent, unwilling to leave him alone with her.

Really.

Tharen wouldn't do anything when she was in this state. He almost felt offended.

Graves was the only one who didn't bother him with unnecessary talking. But that was not anything new.

Tharen crooked a finger at the male, beckoning him closer.

Graves forced himself from his spot near the wall with reluctance, standing on the other side of the table, looking at Tharen. "What do you need?" Graves's voice was gruff, and the stubble on his jaw was more pronounced than usual. He looked haggard.

They all did.

"Keep her steady for me. Hold her down."

Graves placed his gloved hands on the little lamb's shoulders, stilling her as much as he could. She thrashed, tiny whimpers escaping her every so often as she fought off the darkness sweeping throughout her.

It looked painful. Her brows twitched, sweat dotting her forehead, and her legs kicked out weakly. But she still did not open those beautiful eyes.

He hated that she was in pain. *Why* did he hate that she was in pain?

Tharen loved pained. Wanted to see her in the midst of it.

But only by his hand.

That fucking bastard had gotten to her, driven those sinful whimpers from her lips before Tharen could. For that, the Tenebrae would pay.

Lines of darkness webbed from the small cut on her arm, and Tharen pressed his palm right over it. She moaned out at his touch, and Graves's hands tightened on her shoulders.

Vale breathed down Tharen's neck but stayed silent, thank the gods. Tharen didn't think he could put up with the King's orders. Not ever, but especially not right now.

Tharen closed his eyes, allowing his Body magic to work, flowing through her veins.

Her heart pounded irregularly, a loud, discordant thundering in his ears. It sped up, then slowed down. Stuttered, then leveled out.

He felt the air she drew through her lungs as if it were his own. Felt the blood that trudged throughout her veins, something dark and sinister flowing right along with it.

He pushed his magic deeper, drowning out the hushed whispers that had started up from behind him.

Tharen drowned it all out, diving down, down, down into the heart of her. He pushed away the sound of her heartbeats, the labored breathing that was short and sweet and pained. His hands searched her just as his magid did, moving from the cut on her arm and skimming over the veins in her body. He traced her pulse point, swirling up to the inside of her soft elbow and her arm, over the blue-green vein that he knew flowed right to her heart, skimming down the softness of her breasts. He pushed his fingers into the inside of her brassiere, roving lower as he followed that aching call that screamed at his magic.

And then he stopped.

Tharen's palm rested on Luella's lower stomach, her soft skin rising and falling under his touch. Her belly quivered as he brushed a finger below her navel, but he ignored it, brows furrowing as he concentrated on *her*.

There, deep within her soul, something resided.

Magic, so faint, Tharen nearly looked right past it, but no, that was the call of power. It fought and fought, pushing back the darkness that threatened to turn it into something ugly. He knew it wouldn't work. She was far too powerful to be turned.

The mage grinned slowly, eyes popping open.

"She is powerful." The words were an awed and grating tumble that fell, unbidden, from him. He licked his lips, mouth suddenly dry.

Tharen had never felt magic so…

He wracked his brain for the right words to describe what he had felt.

It was vividly irresistible and compelling.

He could have drowned in her—consumed her. The power that called to him like a moth to a flame.

He wanted to… eat her.

Tharen barked a laugh at the thought, causing the males before him to look at him strangely. He paid them no mind. Most didn't understand him.

He didn’t fucking care. Especially when his thoughts were being consumed by a certain little captive.

"Care to share what’s so amusing, Prima?" Vale asked, a bite to his tone.

Tharen arched a brow, a hand still settled on his little lamb’s bare stomach. He felt the rise and fall under his palm and resisted the urge to press harder. "I don’t think my thoughts would be received well."

Bastian jumped in then, ever the pacifist. "What did you sense?" the vampire asked, switching the topic around before fists could fly.

Barbed words were about all they could manage, anyway, with their inability to maim each other. But blessedly, they could still use threatening words or the occasional fist if the intent was not to kill or cause serious injury.

There were loopholes, of course. Like shoving a troublesome demon deep below in the dungeons, supplying him with just enough food and water to keep him breathing… Or sparring. For some reason, training with swords or fists did not seem to hold the intent to kill, even if Tharen wanted to do it most times when he was in the ring with one of them.

"She’s powerful," Tharen repeated his earlier words. "Very."

The demon interjected, "We knew that already." He sounded pissed.

Tharen grinned.

"To feel and to know are two entirely different things, beast. But that’s a foreign notion to you, hm?" Tharen taunted. "You never did have a problem with believing in things you couldn’t see, unlike the rest of us." He jerked his head toward Vale. "It took the Princess being right under his nose in his palace before he realized how severely he had fucked up."

"I didn’t fuck up, Tharen," Vale snarled. "I would do it all over again to have her. Her *kingdom"*—the word was punctuated with a sardonic laugh —"and her freedom both are small prices to pay for our salvation."

"You just wanted her for what she could give you. You don’t care about her." Azgorath touched a bloodied hand to Luella’s lips, tracing them with reverence. Even as he spat cruel truths, he touched her with such care.

Vale scoffed but did not respond.

Tharen thought it a false claim on the demon’s part. Maybe to start, the King didn’t care, but Tharen knew *now* that he did. If not the male himself, then his dragon would sway him with its possessive nature. Already, Tharen knew the King was gone for their captive, even if he showed it in less than favorable ways.

And the mage could not wait until the King admitted to himself—that he had been wrong.

Graves grumbled, "If you're done…" He made an, *on with it,* gesture with a gloved hand.

Bastian stood silently, a hand pressed over his nose and mouth so he would not be tempted by the scent of her. The vampire had always had a thing for fae blood. Being near her must be like being taunted by the finest blends of wine perfectly curated just for him…

They were cracking. All of them.

Tharen eyed the Princess. How could something so small be the cause of such turmoil?

Graves's gloved hands gripped Luella's shoulders, her skin indenting under his firm touch. The raven shifter had always been an enigma. Tharen couldn't sense if the male was as obsessed with her as Azgorath was or wanted nothing to do with her. Tharen thought it to be a little of both.

Tharen pressed down on her lower stomach, watching the way her flesh dimpled, the tiny whimpers that puffed from her parted lips. "The little heirus is fighting." He held each of their eyes as he said, "And she *will* win."

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BASTIAN

Bastian's gums ached.

He craved blood, fangs pulsing in time with the pounding of his head. He needed to feed. And soon. His thoughts were wrapped up in the beckoning memory of the sickly sweet and rich feel of thick, hot blood sliding down his throat, the give of soft flesh under the piercing bite of his fangs, and choked whimpers as he fed. Or even the cool rim of a wineglass touching his lips as he drank and drank. He would take anything at this point.

The vampire let out a heavy sigh, sinking deeply into the chair. His booted foot knocked against the legs of the grand oak table, and his eyes traveled up to its surface. The tabletop was perfectly polished dark wood, little swirls forever etched into the surface, protected by a glass glaze resting overtop.

But that wasn't what captured his attention.

Bastian's eyes were trained on the many pieces of parchment adorning the surface. Maps and accounts from villages, some of the edges of the parchment soaked in old blood as they had passed hands from the war-torn midst of battles, delivered from scouts to the King, who currently sat at the head of the table in the strategy room, a knee notched on his thigh as his long fingers steepled under his chin.

Vale looked deep in thought as he absently stroked a finger over his jaw, brows drawn low and mouth pinched, his green eyes looked more golden

than not with the many flames flickering in the room.

It was darker in here, the tones deep, speaking to the blanket of somberness that clung to their skin like heavy smoke. Even the candlelight seemed dimmer than normal as if answering an unspoken request to keep everything discussed in this room under cover of a hushed night.

The advisory room was Bastian’s domain, where he thrived.

He was always one to advocate for winning with words as opposed to fists, so what better vocation than an advisor?

Bastian ran his tongue over the tip of a fang, gathering a few pieces of parchment together before stacking them. The paper made a thick sound as the edges hit the glass tabletop, and all heads turned to where he was sitting at the other end of the table, opposite Vale.

Azgorath seemed half-mad, the only one not sitting as he paced the sides of the room. He was not taking the Princess’s forced sleep well. "Hurry it up," the demon snapped. "I hate leaving her alone."

"It’s necessary," Graves remarked without inflection.

And it was, but that didn’t stop five natures of angered possession from welling to the surface. They rarely got along, but especially not now. Not when they all were pointing invisible fingers at each other, all frenzied… because of the one who had changed everything.

Tharen sighed, knocking his boots against each other, where they rested languidly on top of the table. Bastian looked at Tharen with disdain. The mage was never one for propriety.

"She’ll be fine," Tharen drawled. He closed his eyes briefly, but not before Bastian caught a glimmer of power shining in his eyes, his magic reaching to the floor above them, where his pet rested in her room, a sleeping beauty on her bed.

They had moved the Princess from the apothecary after Tharen deemed her stable enough. Bastian was glad. The softness of downy pillows would be much more comfortable than the mage’s worktable.

"Lu didn’t seem fine when we left her. She looked deathly," Azogorath seethed.

Graves scrubbed at the stubble on his jaw before mumbling, "But not dead yet."

Bastian couldn’t figure Graves out. He wasn’t sure if the male even liked her or not. He was attracted to her, sure. You would have to be dead to

not feel anything at the sight of her. Even *deathly*, as the demon said she appeared, with her skin paler than moonlight in this frozen state she was in.

Vale let out a low growl, slamming his palms down on the table.

"*Enough*." The dragon shifter looked toward Bastian, a long finger tapping agitatedly on the glass. "Every second spent talking is one less with her. Get on with it, Advisor," Vale snapped.

Bastian covered his look of surprise with a hand over his mouth, clearing his throat sharply. "Very well."

The King and his obsession with the captive Princes was another oddity—one Bastian didn't even begin to examine. Dragons were possessive. He wouldn't be surprised to discover that Vale's dragon had imprinted on Luella. It was nearly undeniable. Especially from the show in the throne room when the Umbra attacked. The way Vale's onyx-scaled dragon bowed its head in submission to her…

They were all gone for her, some of them just hadn't reconciled with that fact.

Even now, Bastian could feel the tugging of his soul, urging him to leave and *go to her*. It had never been as strong as it was now—maybe it was her magic, finally awakening as it fought off the Tenebrae's power.

The memory of her scent addled his mind. Strawberries topped with cream, the faintest hint of fresh roses. Instead of eating her, Bastian often indulged in the berries. If he couldn't have one, he would have the other.

"The Umbra is closing in," Bastian began, donning a role of diplomacy as he refuted all the sinful urges that whispered in his mind. He lifted a scroll from the top of the stack and slid it to the middle of the table. "A recount from one of Graves's spies in Aqua, near the Luna border."

Vale took it, jaw clenching as he read.

The findings weren't good.

"Fuck," the King spat. The scroll fluttered as he threw it down on the table. Tharen picked it up, and he and Graves poured over it together.

Graves leaned back first. Bastian knew the male was already privy to the information.

"The Tenebrae is preparing to advance?" Tharen asked, incredulous. "I thought he would be smart enough to stay in his stolen kingdom behind walls made of moonstone." The words were taunting, and as he spoke, he tapped a finger over the hilt of his dagger where it was sheathed against his hip.

Bastian nodded, contemplating moves—and countermoves. It was all one grand game. Who would win first? Who was more devious and powerful?

After killing the King and Queen of Luna and taking over with an iron-fisted rule, the Tenebrae had been holed up for nearly twenty years in his stolen palace nestled in Luna.

What would make him move now? The answer was obvious…

Her.

The Tenebrae likely assumed the Princess's power had been awakened—or nearly awakened. That was why he was on the move, wanting to get her before they could sink their claws into her and take that power for themselves, turning it against him.

Too late. It was already too late.

Luella had been a wilted rose, and with care and sunlight, she had turned into a budding thing, petals blooming as her magic blossomed. They had forced her to look at them like *they* were her sun, blotting out all the light around until she was left with nothing but them. And she would learn to grow toward them and rely on them solely.

If the Tenebrae had wanted her, he should have made his move long before now instead of waiting.

The little heirus would be the most powerful creature the realms had ever witnessed, and that power would be the Tenebrae's undoing. But if he got to her and whispered his lies in her ear and allowed his shadows to wrap around her mind and cloud her thoughts, then it would be the demise of everyone and everything. They could not allow that to happen.

"Guess he's not as cunning as we assumed," Bastian distractedly remarked. But maybe he was.

The vampire's thoughts spun; he didn't want to admit that it could still be anyone's game. That the Tenebrae likely had many a trick up his sleeves.

"Weak." Azgorath punched a fist into the wall. The stone shuddered under his preternatural strength, little pieces of dust falling around his hand. "Not cunning," he all but snarled.

Tharen arched a brow. "How so, beast? I would surmise you don't have much say in this discussion. What, with being trapped in the dungeons for almost two decades…"

"My *say*"—Az growled, a finger pointing over his head, to where the Princess was resting in an unnatural state of near-death—"is currently

upstairs fighting for her life. So, yes, I would say I have plenty of say in this conversation."

"Tell me, Az," Vale sneered the sobriquet, and Azgorath visibly bristled at the term of endearment uttered from the King's wicked lips. Just from that look alone, Bastian knew whatever the King was about to say would be purposefully antagonizing "Have you tasted her yet?" The corner of Vale's lip curled up, and he steepled his fingers under his chin without care as he regarded the demon.

Azgorath's knuckles turned white as he clenched his fists, chin tipping down as he charged, nearly knocking over Vale's chair with how hard he smacked into the side, a hand fisted around the King's throat. But he didn't squeeze—*couldn't*.

Vale barked a laugh, utterly relaxed even with an angered demon at his throat. "It's the only reason I can see you being so unwaveringly loyal. She's just a female. If you want to be bedded, you can go to Syreni and find some willing shifter to please you… Or three or four. I know you demons can be insatiable."

Azgorath's hand flexed as he released Vale, fingers popping off one by one, before he sat heavily in a free chair, far out of the King's reach. He rested his head in his hands, fingertips skimming over the point of his horns and tangling in his curls. A sigh made his shoulders weigh down. "I am loyal to her because she is ours. *Mine*. Not because I want something she can give me." The demon looked up, holding Vale's eyes with fierce, unwavering strength. "Not power, not intimacy. I just want her."

Bastian allowed his Mind magic to slither into the demon's mind, invisible tendrils allowing him a glance inside the beast's head. He usually refrained from using his magic unless he absolutely had to; it was hard to break into the mind of the unwilling without letting them know something was amiss. But temptation beckoned.

A barrage of thoughts nearly made the vampire keel over, and it took everything in him to remain composed.

Mine. So sweet. Protect her. Have to keep her safe. Can't let them corrupt her. I want her. I need her.

Please, let my Lu be safe.

Bastian pulled his Mind magic back with barely a hitch in his breath, but his fingers tightened their grip on the edge of the table.

He had glimpsed no hint of malicious intent. Azgorath truly cared for the Princess.

My gods.

Did he… *love* her?

The demon had always been lonely, ostracized from his demon brethren in the Below. He was softer than the others, less vicious. Still strong, but not willing to hurt and *take* to get what he wanted; it was unheard of for a demon to permanently reside anywhere else except the fiery realm of the Below, but Azogorath had gone eagerly when he made a deal with Graves to exchange information and his strength in return for a safe place to stay—free of judgment and the horrors of the Below.

But the stint in the dungeons had not helped.

Azgorath had been condemned for disagreeing with the King's… methods regarding how they would use Luella for their benefit, wanting her power to overthrow the Tenebrae—all to become the most feared kingdom in all the lands.

The demon hadn't been able to fathom the thought of using someone who should have been so precious to them. He had plotted to sabotage Vale and his plans, rioting at every chance.

At first, Bastian had agreed with the King, but after *seeing* her so torn and broken and chained, he had slowly realized that maybe they had been all wrong.

She was theirs, after all. Drawn to them, just as they were to her. Maybe if they had courted her, arranged a meeting with a chaperone… They could have sent Bastian first, perhaps, to ease her into it before she met the others. Sent her flowers. Swept her off her feet with dances and fed her plump berries and sugary pastries in gardens instead of bitterly cold dungeons. Bastian would have kissed her there, and she would have melted into him willingly instead of him having to coerce her into tasting those luscious, inviting lips with a deal forged in blood.

Maybe they could have done more. Maybe she would have been receptive to his touch instead of jerking back like the frightened little lamb Tharen always likened her to be.

And maybe she would have fallen, would have gone readily to them instead of being taken in the night.

Robbed of choices.

It's all in the past, Bastian reminded himself.

They couldn’t change it now, only move forward as planned.

Bastian ignored the daggers Azgorath and Vale were shooting at each other with their eyes. If looks could kill, they would all be dead many times over by now…

"The Princess will be the most powerful of *all*," Bastian stressed, reciting the prophecy that had started everything. "She will be over all elements, the sun, and the moon. The Tenebrae knows this, just as we do. But we’re the only ones here who have this knowledge, correct?"

Graves grumbled, "The Fates know as well."

"Very true," Bastian mused, a finger stroking over his jaw.

The Fates, the ones who had called them to their lair and spoke into being the prophecy—a fae who would change everything, having power over all, one day, becoming a queen. She would be the only one who could defeat the darkness.

Only the Fates, the Tenebrae, and their group knew of this. No one else. Unless the Tenebrae told those who were Umbra possessed, but Bastian doubted it. It wouldn’t be conducive to reveal his hand so early or to so many.

"And what else could have sparked this?" Vale inquired. Some of the anger had bled out of his features, but his shoulders were still drawn and tense, eyes constantly shifting toward the ceiling as if he could see through the walls to where Luella lay, motionless, in bed.

"No clue. We’ve been quiet. No one knows but us here." Tharen jostled one of his boots. It made the cup of quills near him rattle.

Bastian gritted his teeth, reaching over to knock the mage’s feet down to the floor. It was like moving a boulder, and he knew the only reason he succeeded was because Tharen allowed it.

"What if he’s tracking her?" Azgorath spoke up, eyes flashing with irritation. "You sensed us after we left the protection of the Silva Noctis. That’s why it took you a bit to find us. I knew as soon as we left the castle grounds, we would be fair game. I just thought…" He shook his head. "It’s possible that’s how the Tenebrae sensed her."

Tharen snorted. "You were sloppy. You should have known that as soon as you left, we would have known exactly where you were. And not just us. You announced her presence to any that were paying attention." The mage bent forward, elbows resting on the table. "We’re always watching her, after all. Nothing escapes us."

"Not when it comes to her," the King agreed.

Graves hummed. "Solis?"

Bastian looked at the male, a quiet and contemplative sound falling from his lips. Possible. Very, very possible.

Vale's palms came down on the table, not too hard, but hard enough to convey his ire.

He hadn't thought of the possibility of Solis yet, then. What the King and Queen could have done before they met their demise…. who they could have told about the Princess.

Bastian gritted his teeth. Fuck.

To be fair, Bastian had not given the Kingdom of Sunlight much thought as of late, either. It had been relatively far from his mind since its downfall —its *deserved* downfall.

"What of it?" Azgorath interjected. Though he was sitting, the demon hadn't stopped his fidgeting, tapping a finger over the table, adjusting his shirt, fingers flexing on his thighs as if he wished a certain someone was perched in his lap…

Graves traced an idle, gloved finger along the tabletop. "That's right." He turned to Bastian, asking, "Does he know? He was thrown into the dungeons right after."

Bastian shook his head slowly. "Not all of it. Not everything. We haven't had the time to go over everything with him."

"Know what?" Az spat, angered about being talked around, no doubt.

Vale stilled the demon with a raised hand, eyes narrowing at his lack of patience. Like he was any better. "Solis is… complicit," the King finally settled on.

Tharen snorted; Bastian coughed to cover his similar noise of amusement.

"*Complicit*," Bastian mocked. Complicit, his ass.

Solis was partly to blame for it all. The Tenebrae's quick rise to power. Supplying him with an arsenal.

Sheltering *her*.

Bastian's eyes trailed up to the ceiling at his thoughts as if drawn by some force. The heirus Princess. *His pet.*

"How so?" Azgorath inquired.

Vale waved a hand at Bastian, gesturing him to speak.

With a deep breath, Bastian collected his thoughts, trying to remind himself the demon had been out of the loop for two decades. There was so much he wasn’t yet aware of.

Relations with Solis had been rocky at best before Azgorath was thrown into the dungeons, but after? Everything went to shit. Solis was the only kingdom untouched by the Umbra, completely at peace, until King Vale called for Serpentis to march, finally deeming them ready to steal the Princess away from her tower. To steal her from the ones who had been harboring her… to steal from the ones who had stolen.

"Before," Bastian began. "Before the dungeons. What do you recall of Solis?"

Elbows thudding on the glass tabletop, Azgorath leaned forward as if he could not contain himself. "Solis was always a temperamental kingdom. I thought a war would come eventually. But when"—he swallowed—"Lu was born after lifetimes of waiting for her, I felt that call deep in my gut and realized I couldn’t stand the thought of using her for her power, molding her into the perfect weapon," he spat, and Vale’s knuckles grew white as he gripped the edge of the table. "And I wanted nothing more than to keep her safe. Treasure her like we should have done all along."

The demon’s eyes grew soft as he spoke, and Bastian didn’t think he had ever seen such an expression on his face.

Azgorath cleared his throat, giving a soft shake of his head. "When you threw me into the dungeons for rebelling against your plans, I didn’t think anything more of Solis. Figured the brewing war would be your problem." His face grew stony.

This was the demon Bastian knew. Mercurial and impatient. And far too soft for his own good.

His soft heart was what had made him so isolated in the Below, what had caused the lock to turn on the iron bars of his cell—he was too gentle a male for politics and war.

Bastian let out a long, weary sigh, shoulders caving forward under an invisible pressure. He had so many regrets. And he wasn’t the only one. The difference: Bastian let those regrets show, and the others were too prideful to admit they had messed up.

"When the Tenebrae overthrew Luna, reports of supposed *possessed* villagers arose. In all kingdoms. Save Solis and Luna," Bastian started, eyes drifting to the swirls on the dark, wooden table as he spoke. Memories. So

many memories. And most were bad. "Around the same time, Luella was born. We felt the call…"

The demon’s shoulders fell as he let out a breath. "I remember," he recalled. "That call to her. We had waited for centuries. Waited so long that everything else lost meaning. Even the waiting grew boring."

Graves hummed, toying with a soft-feathered tip of a quill between his fingers. The feathers were inky black. Bastian wondered if it made him sad—that he couldn’t stretch his wings for fear of being found out. The male’s other hand gripped the amulet on his chest. He did that a lot. Like he wasn’t even aware he was doing it, a curse and a blessing.

The chair creaked as Vale stood, walking to the small bookcase leaning against the wall. It was not filled with books of pleasure but tomes older than they were. This room was protected by Tharen’s magic. It was safe here.

That was why Vale reached for a certain leather-bound book, pulling away a strip of paper, torn haphazardly, and pressed between the pages to keep it safe.

Vale flattened it on the table, and Bastian didn’t even look. He could recite the contents of the paper by heart.

The prophecy they had been given by the Fates.

When they were all called to that little cabin nestled deep in the shadowed woods of the Silva Noctis, transported there in a near blink of a moment, all stumbling and confused as they had realized where they were—and that something older than life itself had called them. They did not have the rest of the prophecy. The Fates were fickle and cunning like that.

But what they did have spoke of everything they needed to understand what they would have to do.

Vale read, "*To expel the dark, the shadow’s spark, and defeat the stolen, she must bond with the chosen*."

"Fuck, it’s not like it’s changed in the past few days, Vale," Tharen moaned, scrubbing a heavy hand down his face.

"Do not test me, Prima. You’re lucky I can’t kill you," the King seethed. The scent of crackling flames filled the room as smoke wafted from his nostrils.

Damn. They were all too agitated for any modicum of civility.

Bastian ignored their taunting words and reached for the paper, pulling it to him. His fingers passed over the torn edges. The words that cut off…

"*…in the stars. For eons, they are. The Vincire will be bound, and the queen will be crowned*," Bastian mumbled the words under his breath.

Vincire.

Bonded.

They were bonded, and they would make her a queen one day. But would she be a willing ruler? Or would they force her into marriage and fit a barbed crown upon her head so she would not be able to remove it? That part eluded them all.

Graves held Bastian’s eyes as he spoke the words, intently listening. They all knew these words, but it never made it easier.

The rest of the prophecy taunted him. The part that was the hardest to discern, yet the easiest.

A splintered lineage, to bring together the kingdoms. She will be one over all elements, the sun, and the stars, to defeat the malevolence.

Luella’s magic was powerful, but her *true* heritage was unknown. She was not the Princess of Solis.

"The only thing we are certain of is her ability to wield all the elements, the sun, and the moon," Bastian said.

"You’ve never discovered anything more of her lineage, then?" Azgorath asked.

Vale shook his head. "No. She could be any of the fae. But our guess has always been Solis since that’s where we first felt the call from. We have just never been able to figure out how the King and Queen got their hands on her. We’ve sent spies, scoured tomes… But nothing. She was like a ghost. Nothing and nothing, and then one day, *here*. That godsdamned call pulling us all."

The King seemed to resent her more than any of them.

"Solis remains the only kingdom untouched by the Umbra. Luna, of course, has many Umbra in its midst, but our spies report they are not as violent as the ones from other kingdoms. The Tenebrae is"—Vale huffed a laugh—"gracious, in that regard… Brother turning against brother. Siblings fighting and killing," he spat the words. "A disease that ravaged the lands turning those afflicted into something vile. Evil."

"Solis has kept its inhabitants completely unaware of what is going on in the other kingdoms," Graves murmured, still rolling the end of the quill between his fingers. He wasn’t looking at any of them as he spoke,

entranced by dark feathers. "They are unable to leave. No outside correspondence and no visitors. No one gets in or out."

"A perfect, little bubble." Tharen’s lip curled. "It’s why Luella’s so hated here. They’re jealous. And angry at her ignorance."

Bastian couldn’t recall the mage uttering her name before. It sounded surprisingly… good on his tongue. It didn’t spark possessiveness like he thought it would.

His throat bobbed with a swallow.

But how were they meant to share her?

"We can only ascertain that a deal was struck between the Tenebrae and Solis," Vale continued, fingers tracing the torn edges of the scroll before him. "We know she is not the biological offspring of the King and Queen of Solis, but she could still be a Solis fae."

"Or not," Bastian interjected. His eyes shot to Graves. "Glamors do exist."

Graves looked up at his words, finger stilling over the feather. "That narrows the pool. A glamor to last twenty years would have to be done by a powerful mage."

Tharen grinned at his words. Cocky bastard.

"What mage alive has power rivaling his?" Azgorath begrudgingly jerked his head to Tharen.

The demon likely didn’t want to admit it, but as Prima, Tharen was the most powerful mage in all the kingdoms. For another to conjure a glamor to conceal one’s appearance for two decades was nearly inconceivable. But not impossible. It would make it easier to find the one who did it.

Vale gestured to Bastian, urging him to share their theory on Solis’s untouched state.

"The deal we theorize that was struck between the Tenebrae and Solis could have possibly granted Luella a haven under the guise of Princess, and in turn, the King and Queen immunity." As Bastian spoke, Azgorath’s dark brows drew low, contemplating the merit of his words.

It wasn’t factual, a mere educated guess. But why else would Solis remain untouched? And what other deal could have been struck?

"If so," the demon began, "that widens the possibility that Lu is not from Solis."

Bastain nodded.

"It does," Vale agreed. "But does where she came from hold any consequence? We know the heirus will be the most powerful. That is enough."

A white braid fell over Tharen’s temple as he shook his head. "Wherever she came from, it doesn’t matter. She has no one but us now."

Bastian’s stomach rolled at his words. He didn’t know if it was from his thirst for blood or unease. The two bled together as of late.

And as they spoke, he couldn’t keep his mind from trailing to the subject of their terse conversation.

Luella Eritrais, the orphaned Princess. Heirus. Captive. She had many titles, and he couldn’t help but feel they would only grow.

His heart clenched, and he pressed a fist against his chest to abate the tightness.

Look at him. He was as weak and soft as the demon.

But he couldn’t help it. Not after knowing her, seeing her. He wanted nothing more than to have her freely. Without trickery and deception.

If Bastian groveled, would she forgive him? Could she one day find comfort from his touch like she did with the demon?

What would it take? He would do nearly anything. Had granted her a library for escape—would do more, even.

Bastian just wanted to not feel so guilty at the mere thought of her.

Would she forgive him?

Could she forget?

Gods, she smelled so sweet. Strawberries and the faintest whiff of cream, mingling with the scent of freshly cut roses.

Bastian ran his nose along Luella’s neck, inhaling her scent. Her pulse was weak, her eyes closed as she slept. But that never stopped him before, did it?

After the meeting in the war advisory room, they had all dispersed. Azgorath had been the first to stomp off, quickly followed by Tharen, while Graves had stayed to discuss his spies’ findings with their King.

Leaving Bastian alone and grateful. He wanted the Princess for himself. If only for a moment.

His fangs ached, and he so desperately wished to sink his teeth into her supple, soft skin, but he refrained. Painfully.

Everything about her was perfect, and every time he kept himself from her was painful. It was painfully perfect. All those nights stealing into her dreams… He had wanted to do more.

Her creamy skin, all bare and smooth, taunted him. Those luscious thighs he wanted wrapped around his waist. The curve of her hips, perfect for his hands to grip.

His head fell forward, nestled in the crook of her neck as he breathed her in.

Bastian didn't think he had ever wanted anyone so fiercely as he did her.

That's why he was here, after all, hovering over her as she slept, praying to gods he did not believe in for a miracle.

But sometimes, you had to be your own miracle.

Magic tingled against Bastian's skin, and he pressed his palm against Luella's forehead.

He did not have to touch her to enter her mind, but the physical connection grounded him.

She felt cold under his fingertips. And as he stroked a finger over her temple and down to the soft curve of her cheek, his mouth grew dry, tongue thick. He had the overwhelming urge to beg for her forgiveness.

Even though she wouldn't know.

It would be futile. Just like using his magic to enter her dreams as she slept.

But—

"I'm so…" Bastian sounded choked up, not at all like himself, even as he cleared his throat and tried again. A softly uttered attempt for forgiveness in the stillness of the room. It was easier—when no one was listening. "I'm sorry."

A perfect parallel of the night it all changed. The night of her capture. When Bastian had stolen into her dreams and whispered a soft, *I'm sorry*. Even then, he hadn't been sure why he felt compelled to enter her mind. But when he saw her, curled on the armchair in front of the crackling fire, he had wanted nothing more than her forgiveness then. It had started as a soft whimper at the first sight of her, but now it was a roaring call, unable to be ignored.

He didn't think he could live with her hating him.

He knew it was a fool’s hope, but that didn’t stop him from carding his fingers almost adoringly down her soft, cool skin to cup her cheek.

Bastian let his thoughts drift, seeking out the fascinating mind of their little captive.

In a haze of melted softness and warmth from a false fire, everything came together.

Luella was there, sitting on the leather chair, eyes closed and head tilted back. She wore a white, diaphanous gown, and it took everything in him not to let his eyes linger too long on the enticing curve of her hips or the swell of her chest. She looked so small in the chair; it dwarfed her frame, and his eyes stung as he just… watched her.

Not yet awoken, she was…

Wherever she was.

Even in her dreams, she slept.

But this dream was different from the rest.

Magic prickled in the air. But it was not his own. It was so strong that Bastian nearly stumbled under its weight as it pressed against him, urging him out, out.

The vampire did not bow. Never had for anyone but his King.

A small niggling in his mind conjured the image of him on his knees for her, too. And his heart, so cold in his chest, fluttered at the thought.

Bastian gave a low chuckle, utterly astonished by the tranquility of her resting, ethereal form. He sat back against the table in front of the Princess, a hand skimming over her bare knee.

He was content to watch for now and wait for her to awaken.

It was inevitable, after all.

Just like them.

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AZGORATH

Please, please, please.

Azgorath chanted the words over and over again in his head.

Please. A hand placed on the one he knew to be his.

Please. Sorrowful rage coiled within him, something deep in his soul calling him to the fae lying on the bed.

Please. Wake up.

But it was no use.

His Lu stayed still. Silent.

And he hated the silence.

It reminded him of *before*.

His life Below. Cast out and shunned. An interloper among those who should have been like his brothers and sisters, in a place that should have been his home.

Just like the name she had given him—a piece of her, *given* to him—everything changed when he met Luella.

Azgorath was the violence of fists pounding against flesh. Anger and silence. But Az was someone that could perhaps be worthy of her. He yearned to be worthy of her. Worthy of her love.

Az didn't think he would ever stop trying to make himself better for her. Just so he wouldn't feel so inadequate when she wrapped her small hand around his or curled into him or looked up at him with those big, beautiful golden eyes.

She was his, and he was hers, undoubtedly so.

Az didn’t think he could breathe without her—he didn’t know how he had survived so long without her presence. Her soft scent, the smattering of freckles dusted across her nose, the mellifluous sound of her voice. Something in him had awoken, as if from a deep slumber, the very moment he had laid eyes on her in the dungeons.

He wanted to curl around her and sleep. Kiss her dizzy and keep her safe. Show her everything she had missed while she was locked away her whole life.

Az sighed, stretching his legs out on the bed as he shifted to rest his back more comfortably on a pillow. The action jostled Luella where she lay on the plush mattress, and she leaned into his side, the bed dipping under his weight.

"What do you dream of?" Az whispered over her cool skin.

He knew there would be no answer.

It had been days, after all. Days after silence and pining and waiting. It reminded him of before she came.

But this time, there was hope. She would wake up. She had to. Or it would all be for naught. The Fates would have foreseen her death, and the prophecy would not have been woven if she were going to die here and now. So Az had hope that she would wake up.

Anything else just… couldn’t be true.

"Am I in your dreams?" Az asked. Tendrils of golden hair stirred from his breath. He pressed his lips to her temple, eyes closing as he breathed her in.

He was careful of his horns, not wanting them to poke her. His neck craned uncomfortably as he held them away from her, but he did not care.

If she was here, trapped in this bed and trapped in her mind, then he would be here too, trapped with her.

He lifted a lock of her golden hair, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger. It was smooth and clean from where he had washed and brushed it the other night.

Those two maids had swept in, determined to keep her presentable at the behest of their King, but Az would have none of it. He couldn’t handle anyone else being near her. Touching her.

He would take care of her. It was his job. Not theirs.

Resting a palm on her stomach, he felt the soft rise and fall of her chest as she breathed in air to keep herself alive.

In… Her chest expanded, and so did his.

Out… He echoed every breath she took.

Az was stretched out beside her, body molded to hers, but it was not enough. He wanted to crawl inside her—make a home in her heart.

"In the dungeons, when you slept, I often wondered what it was that you dreamed of," Az said. "Sometimes your face would scrunch up, and you looked so… peaceful. Soft. You always look soft, but in sleep, it was a peaceful, quiet softness. Like anything could happen, and you would still be at ease." He ran his nose along her cheek, the soft scent of ripe berries mixed with creamy rose soothing something deep in his gut.

He sighed. "But then you would wake up and realize where you were and that nothing was okay. And it broke my heart." A sob threatened to crawl from the depths of him. He shoved it down—it was what he was used to, making himself strong so others wouldn't think he was weak. Even though he was.

He was too weak. Had grown up hearing it from his brethren in the Below, jaunts and teases and cruel words. Too weak to be a demon but too brutish and crude to live in the kingdoms. He was never *in*, always on the outskirts.

But as Az watched Luella sleep, he realized how grateful he was for that softness. It made her open up to him.

His soft heart had allowed for *this*.

Something gentle and sweet in his arms. Something that belonged to him.

His fingers tightened on her waist. But she was something that belonged to *them*, too.

"Everything is changing," Az murmured.

He held his breath, waiting for a reply, but none came.

Only the soft stillness of the night, flickers of moonbeams that shone through the glass doors of the balcony, and a soft breeze that kissed his bare chest and fluttered the curtains.

It was quiet, and they were alone.

Lu was so enticing. She looked as though she was merely sleeping. Maybe that's what made him so bold.

Holding a hand against her shoulder, the other cupping her cheek, Az shifted to hover half of his body over hers, knees pressed against her side to keep himself up so he wouldn't crush her under his weight.

The demon leaned down, warm puffs of his breath rustling tiny pieces of hair that framed her soft features. Her lips were pale, not as rosy as he remembered when she was awake and healthy. But still, so inviting. Would they taste as good as she smelled?

The ever-present blush that had marred her cheeks was gone, replaced by a pale smoothness. Pretty still, though in a different way. Less alive and more untouchable. Like she was something just out of reach.

He knew he shouldn't. He really, really shouldn't. It was wrong.

Az had been trying to do the right thing for her. He was trying to be good. His heart was soft. But the memory of her pressed flush against him as they hid in the Silva Noctis beckoned him salaciously. Desired thrummed deep in his gut, pressing hard under his skin.

Gods, he *wanted*.

He couldn't help himself. Not when she was here, under him, looking so soft and sweet and utterly his.

A whisper of touch as his finger skimmed across her plump bottom lip, and Az's mouth closed the scant distance between them. A soft closed-mouth brush of his lips against hers. It was dry, and both of their lips were chapped. But he would not change a thing about it.

He pulled away, the tip of his tongue wetting his lips. He tasted her on himself—the faintest flavor of rosy succulence.

It wasn't enough.

One more, Az resolved. Just one more taste.

The next joining of their lips was slick with his own saliva.

Az parted Luella's lips with his own, aching to slip his tongue into her mouth, but he refrained. Later, he would taste every bit of her that his tongue could reach.

She tasted so good. Her lips were so soft. Az melted into her, aching. He wished Lu were awake so he wouldn't feel so vile, stealing this—what was most likely her first kiss—from her.

But this moment would be his. Shrouded in the quiet of this room, between him and her; though, she would never know. Only him.

Az smiled against Luella's lips.

Something only for him.

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THE KING

"It's time."

King Vale shot Tharen a charged look, willing the mage to give him some peace.

A heavy sigh left Vale's lungs as he bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He scrubbed a hand down his face, feeling the unshaven stubble on his jaw. He was a mess. He needed it all to stop.

But a reprieve would not be granted to someone like him—or any of them.

Their chance for a quiet existence was robbed when the Fates called the five of them to their lair, revealing their futures with esoteric words and prophesied ramblings.

"You know I'm right, Vale," Tharen continued. "She'll wake soon. And when she does, we need to be prepared."

Vale argued, "It's been nearly six nights, and the Princess still sleeps."

They both looked to Luella. The heirus sleeping in her bed…

Her hands were folded neatly on her stomach, the sheets tucked around her waist, and her head rested primly on a soft pillow. Golden curls fell in soft tumbles around her face, making her pale skin all the more pronounced. Dark lashes cast shadows on her cheeks.

Vale found himself missing the soft gold of her eyes.

It had nearly been a week since the battle, a week of her unmoving in this bed, and Vale struggled to recall the exact shade of her eyes. They were

like jewels, shining and vibrant. He willed her to awaken, just so he might be able to see the glimmer of hatred shining within. It would be better than this nothingness he was faced with.

As a dragon, Vale was attracted to shiny, pretty things, but nothing was as alluring as *her*.

He was fascinated with every bit of the fae Princess. The softness of her hair, the flecks of luminescent gold in her eyes, the way her nose upturned slightly at the tip, and the ever-present rosy hue that colored her cheeks.

The possessively insane urge to keep her trapped in his room and never let her go gnawed at him. He wanted to shower her with jewels and the finest dresses and parade her around to show everyone what they could never have. Or better yet, keep her tucked away and safe, something only for his eyes to behold.

Oh, and he would. Vale yearned to discover her all over, peel back her clothes, and trace patterns on her thighs and over her hips with his tongue. He wanted to make her his unequivocally.

But no, he had to share.

Fuck. He hated sharing.

Vale's dragon clawed within him, desperate to be released.

I want her. Let me have her. She looks like she would taste so, so good.

Smoke curled from Vale's nostrils, and he tugged at his hair at the mass of thoughts his dragon spewed at him.

Take, take, take.

Keep her safe.

Lock her up.

Mine, seethed the dragon.

His fingers shook as he smoothed the lapels of his coat.

"*Ours*," Vale snarled in reply.

Tharen raised a brow, the sharpness of his jaw prominent as he cocked his head. "Trouble?"

Vale stamped down the urge to flee. To shift. To let his dragon win and take Luella somewhere safe, dark, and warm. They loved safe and dark and warm. And she would look so good wearing nothing but a fur blanket, wrapped up safe on a pallet, firelight flickering over her bare skin, and no one around but them.

Gods.

He needed to get out of here. He was going crazy. She was making him crazy.

Vale pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezing shut as he ignored the pulsing tug. "No," he growled. "Everything is fine." But his words were gruff, and the scent of crackling embers filled the room.

They both knew it wasn't *fine*.

He was a dragon, for fuck's sake. Carnal desires called to him, and he could only ignore his basal instincts for so long.

But Vale did not get where he was today without forcing himself into a semblance of control. By pretending to be something he was not. Instead, he was chomping at the bit to shift into a dragon and never return, raze buildings to the ground, and fly free. Take her with him. Coat his snout with blood from those who dared to stand in his way.

He wanted to just… give in.

But Vale had never given in. Never been allowed the opportunity to exist as their kind should—unfettered by rules and niceties.

Shifters were ruled by their animalistic instincts. To feed, fight, and fuck. And every day was a battle to resist the urge to give in, to ensure he ruled his kingdom with fearsome, controlled might.

Tharen gave him a knowing look. "You sure?"

"Yes," Vale replied, a growl laced underneath the word.

Tharen merely nodded, used to Vale's internal battle with his dragon.

The room grew quiet as the mage gave Vale time to calm himself. Or try to, at least.

Vale found himself focusing on Luella. The way her lips were slightly parted as she lay there, the tiniest puffs of air blowing from her mouth as she breathed, the soft rise and fall of her chest—evidence that she wasn't dead yet.

That they could still win.

Still own her.

Strangely, the Princess calmed him. His dragon's impatience was quelled the longer he watched her. The tempestuous roiling within him, the pacing and clawing. It all… stopped.

Mine, the dragon hissed—less a snarled claim and more a softly said cry.

And this time, Vale didn't recant the claim.

She was his. Both of theirs. *All* of theirs.

Touch.

And Vale did.

He found himself standing. Slowly. Tharen watched him from the corner of his eye, unmoving and unspeaking, curious.

Vale brushed the back of his hand along the Princess’s face, barely touching her. Coolness radiated from her skin. He held his palm in front of her mouth, feeling chilled air hit his hand as she exhaled.

"Wake up," Vale murmured over her.

Something rustled behind him, and Tharen came to stand at his back.

"Soon," the mage proclaimed.

"How soon?" Vale nearly growled. But he didn’t turn. He kept his focus on Luella as she slumbered. He felt that if he removed his attention from her softness, he would break. That his dragon would win, and he would burn it all down.

"The Fates are never wrong." Tharen clasped a heavy hand on Vale’s shoulder, and his dragon roiled, seething at the unwelcomed touch. "If she were to die here, nothing would have meaning. She will awaken, and when she does, we must be ready."

Vale bit back a growl, knuckles growing white from how hard he stopped himself from attacking. Though the King was riled, his touch was gentle with his captive, a warm hand smoothing over her cold cheek. His hand shook in his effort to keep his touch soft. Even when he wanted to rip her from this bed and take her far away.

Tharen seemed to sense Vale was at a breaking point, but he didn’t back away. The mage loved to flirt with death, nearly as much as he loved to flirt and toy with females.

Vale could hear the smile in Tharen’s voice as he said, "*The Vincire will be bound, and the queen will be crowned*."

The words made Vale’s shoulders tense even further, and he could nearly feel his dragon flick the end of his long, onyx tale as he wildly proclaimed, *My bonded. My queen.*

"The Fates are never wrong," Tharen repeated emphatically. His fingers bit into Vale’s shoulder. "We have not completed the bond, and she has not yet been crowned. Do not fret, my King." The title was a rarity—the mage was never one to give credence to hierarchies, but just this once, Vale knew it was Tharen’s strange way to show he cared.

Tharen stepped closer then, brushing against Vale’s side as the pair stared down at Luella. The mage’s tanned, scarred hand gripped her wrist, lifting her pale, dainty arm up to his face. Tharen hummed at the touch, a shaky breath filling the room as his features twitched like he was holding himself back, too. Undone from her touch.

"She *will* awaken. Her power is here, can’t you feel it? She’s fighting."

Vale felt it. He had sensed it ever since her eyes had fallen closed in Terra. A powerful pulse radiating from her, more than just the tug of their bond, but a call of her magic. Wild and untamed and unique.

He gave a soft nod, his dragon oddly quiet while he watched Tharen stroke over Luella’s forearm. "It is unlike anything I’ve ever felt."

"She will rule everything." Tharen shivered, but not with fear. Desire.

Vale’s mouth was dry as he rubbed the pad of his thumb over Luella’s cheekbone, a soft spark racing from her skin to his—a promising jolt.

"Everything," Vale echoed. "But us."

Tharen smirked, lifting Luella’s hand to rub it against his cheek. The action was strangely animal, and *so* Tharen that Vale snorted.

"But us."

One of Tharen’s white braids tickled against the back of Luella’s pale hand as he held it to his face. The color fit her, strangely enough. With her peculiar complexion, the white seemed more fitting than her current muted gold strands.

"I’m glad we got to her before the Tenebrae," Tharen murmured.

And just like that, calmness left him.

Vale locked his jaw at the mention of the Tenebrae. The mysterious male who had usurped the crown of Luna after killing the past King and Queen.

Vale chuckled under his breath. Not just a mystery male but someone he had once known.

Grown up with, played with, *loved*.

But that love had turned into a sour hatred as the years passed. As the soft male Vale had called brother, turned to something evil before his eyes.

His half-brother, Caliban.

His dragon hissed at the thought, and Vale kept his glinting green eyes trained on the steady moving of Luella’s stomach as she breathed.

Vale couldn’t pinpoint when exactly it had started.

It had been slow and steady. Caliban had grown distant, sneaking out at odd hours as his behavior grew more and more erratic. Before long, Vale would go stretches of time without seeing his half-brother, and then one day, when he did see him again, everything had been different, and Vale realized the one he had called brother could be treated as such no more.

Perhaps it was the fault of their late father. Vale was his father's only full-blooded spawn, and Caliban was a bastard.

An accident, they all whispered; but Vale rejected that hushed gossip as bullshit.

Like it's an accident to fuck someone until they grew pregnant.

Vale never did come to know the true lineage of Caliban's mother. He had no idea what kind of female she was. Vale only knew his half-brother definitely didn't take after their father's looks. Vale had his father's green eyes, golden hair, strong jaw, and ill temper; but his mother's light curls and medium skin tone, a shade that shifted between deeply tanned and wintery pale depending upon the season.

Caliban had none of these, save the familiar green eyes of their shared father…

"Fuck! *Vale*!"

Vale was jolted from his thoughts at Tharen's sharp words.

He blinked and looked around, only to see his hands gripping the silken sheets on the bed, embers crackling against the ends, sparking off of his fingers, and burning charred holes into the pristine white. It turned black and tainted from his touch.

Ash fell on the top of Luella's arms, and he quickly brushed it off, furious at himself for losing control like that.

Fuck.

Protect, his dragon hissed.

"Godsdammit!" Vale cursed. "*You* protect. That wasn't protecting her!" He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

He knew he looked mad, talking to himself like this. Only the other four knew of the internal battles he waged with his dragon. If he gave in, it wouldn't be so bad. But he could not.

Shaking his hands out to dispel the fire burning at his fingertips, Vale stood, unable to stomach being near her like this.

What if Tharen hadn't been there?

What if Vale had been alone, with no one to stop him?

What would have happened then?

"I can’t," Vale breathed, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth. He could still feel her on his fingertips, smell her on his skin.

Mine.

"I have to go—" Vale wasted no time, words cutting off as he felt his dragon give a valiant roar within him. He burned.

Vale barely noticed Tharen’s pinched features or the way he sat almost gingerly on the edge of the bed, fingers trailing through Luella’s soft hair.

Take her. Now. The dragon’s demands echoed throughout his head.

And Vale did the only thing he knew to stave off the beast: relent.

He stumbled to the double glass doors of the balcony, bracing a hand on the wall to keep himself from falling over with his unsteady gate. The cool night air nipped at his heated skin, and Vale tipped his head back, relishing in the feel of it, but it did nothing to abate the prowling beast rattling the bars of his ribcage.

Out.

A demand he could agree with…

Without any more thought, Vale hauled himself over the railing, rocking in the wind as he stood on shaking legs, nothing keeping him from tumbling right over the side.

The wind whipped through his hair and ruffled the silk of his already-wrinkled shirt. The side of the palace overlooked the cliffs, a steep face of rocks that fell right into the roaring sea below.

Waves crashed against the rockface, and the salty air tickled against his senses.

A strong urge to look back licked at him—called to him. That damnable call, Vale didn’t know how he had resisted it before.

Vale steeled himself against it with a gritted jaw.

And then, he jumped.

The wind howled around him, and he fell down, down; his dragon let out a long sigh, pleased.

Good, his dragon grumbled.

In mid-air, Vale’s skin tore, bones cracking, and flesh turning into something larger.

His wings snapped into being, onyx scales overtaking flesh as he shifted.

Warm puffs of air blew from his snout as his wings flapped, lifting him upwards into the night sky. He passed through wispy clouds and winked at the stars, strong wingbeats taking him somewhere further. Safer.

Warmer.

His den.

As the dragon flew through the night sky, he was called back, a tug in his soul that, this time, he could not quite resist.

His large head turned, looking back to the imposing castle perched upon the edge of the cliffs.

Right to the opened balcony doors and what he knew lay inside them.

Mine.

Vale’s feet moved without his permission, taking him down the corridors of the castle.

It was like a dream, almost.

Everything felt disoriented, fuzzy, and just out of his reach. Like that strange space between wake and sleep.

The candlelight flickered in the scones along the walls. The flames swayed to the side as he passed by, reaching out to him.

He knew where he was going, where he was being called.

It was time.

Mine, his dragon hissed.

"Ours," Vale murmured under his breath.

It was night, and the moon filtered through the thin windows along the halls, casting elongated strips of white illumination on the dark floors. The amber flames mingled with the brightness of the moon, gold and silver intertwining.

A portent of the something *more* that was coming. A sign it was all changing, and no one could stop it.

The marriage of light and dark, shadows and brightness, was all around.

And as Vale came to a jarring stop at the door leading to Luella’s chambers, he felt it deep within his soul: the call of irresistible magic, the tether that kept their fates closely entwined.

Vale pushed open the door.

They were already there. All four gathered around Luella as she lay motionless on the bed.

The King stumbled inside, eyes locking on the Princess and never leaving, even as the others looked curiously at him. His rumpled clothes, shirt half-buttoned, and feet bare. Vale had woken from his bed as if dragged from a dream—as if he was *still* dreaming. His hair was mussed with sleep, and his eyes half-lidded.

He finally tore his eyes from her and cast a cursory glance around the room.

Vale looked a mess, he knew. But at least they all did.

Tharen was shirtless—no surprise there—and looked as hazily riled as Vale felt. Graves wore no gloves, but his shirt was laced to his collarbones, and he wore thick breeches with heavy boots on his feet. The male hadn’t been asleep, then? Out collecting secrets, no doubt…

The laces on Bastian’s pants were untied, and a silken robe fluttered open around his bare chest. The silky strands of his dark hair stood up around the crown of his head, and Vale gave a half-smile. The vampire was always put together, just as Vale was. It was a rare sight to see him so ruffled.

And Azgorath, Vale took him in. The demon looked wild and rawly untamed as he sat on the edge of Luella’s bed, tanned, shaking hands gripping her pale, still ones. His bare chest was scarred; Vale knew the sources of many of the old, white marks that lined his skin. Battles fought together. And even the small cut on his lower stomach when Vale had accidentally nicked him with a sword when they were training. From *before*. When Vale hadn’t driven him away.

Vale was the first to break the silence. "It is time. Her power…" He was without words.

"I’ve never—" Bastian cleared his throat. His voice was gruff with disuse and sleep. "I’ve never felt anything like it. Like her."

Vale agreed. Even now, with her, he felt it. The call.

The room was teeming with power, something they had never seen the likes of before, even as old as they all were. Centuries, they had all lived, and Vale had never felt power so deep, so visceral and raw.

"Fate always prevails." Tharen stroked a hand along the silken sheets of Luella’s bed.

Vale noted the scorch marks were gone, even though it was just yesterday he had been in here and almost burned her silk linens to ash. Graves or Bastian most likely had switched out the blankets. Vale looked to the pair, regarding how still they stood. Waiting for this indubitable change to occur, breaths still, as if in fear any move would set it off.

"You feel it?" Azgorath muttered, entranced as he held Luella's hands. He didn't look up, didn't look away from her like he couldn't, utterly trapped.

Vale knew the feeling well. It was taking all of his willpower to keep his feet firmly planted on the floor and not charge forward and scoop her up like he so desperately desired.

"Power," Graves conceded. "Mountains of it."

No one replied, afraid to break the wondrous heaviness of the room.

The air was thick and heady with tension, one little move would cause it all to snap and break.

A secret part of Vale wanted to see that deeply. He wanted to see her change, wanted to see her wake up and feel the call in her own gut, just as he had for the past centuries. Maybe then she would understand they were destined.

She could run, but she could not hide from this. From him.

Make her mine, take her, keep her safe, his dragon chanted in his head, overwhelmed by the power in the room.

Azgorath looked up but didn't take his hands off Luella as he asked, "What do we do now?"

"We wait," Graves uttered.

And wait, they would.

Vale rounded the side of the bed, heading to the balcony doors. They were cracked open, letting in faint gusts of night air, and Vale placed his hand on the curved handles and pushed the doors open fully.

It was loud. Or maybe he had been in the quiet for too long.

Either way, everything was extraordinarily vibrant.

The waves crashed harshly against the rocks below, swirls of darkness and seafoam curling against the blanket of thick blue sea. The ocean was nearly black at night, a mirror that reflected the speckle of stars above. The sky was cloudless, and the moon was full, a perfectly round face of pure white shining high in the sky.

Even the moon did not hide this night, forever watching above.

Wind rustled against his hair, blowing the tousled strands into further disarray. And for once, Vale didn't care. Just this once, he would allow himself to be as wild and untamed as the sky and the ocean. Just this once, he would give into his carnal desires and animalistic nature.

A wide smile curled upon Vale's lips as he let his head tilt back, basking in the beauties of the earth.

The roaring outside silenced the sound of the talking inside, and Vale was glad. He did not want to hear any more talk of the Tenebrae or war. He just wanted to *be*. If only for a little while.

The King stood still and silent, the call within him always tugging him back, urging him to turn and look.

And this time, Vale did not ignore it; his dragon pushed him to turn. Already, he felt possessiveness well up from the beast.

Look, look, look.

Mine. Keep her safe.

Vale turned his head, looking into the safe cocoon of the room. Golden light from the candles flickered, and there she lay, cast in moonlight and flame.

His heart clenched with something unfamiliar.

Protect.

Go to her.

Vale answered the plea of his dragon. He turned fully, stepping out of the cover of night and into the dim warmth of Luella's room.

Just as he stepped over the threshold, it happened.

The moon crested toward the highest point of the sky, and the earth trembled under his feet.

The very walls of the castle shook with the force of something grander than he could ever imagine.

Her power.

As if in a trance, Vale moved forward. Everything was fuzzy; the room rocked around him, and his hands shook as he steadied himself with a palm braced against the trembling wall.

He tilted to the side but did not fall—a strange feeling of vertigo. His head spun, and his shoulders caved forward with the weight of buzzing power. It emanated from her in droves, making his throat thick and his heart stutter in his chest.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine…

His dragon paced in the bars of the cage within Vale's soul, seething as he demanded to be let out and—

Vale's head hurt.

Too much. It was too much.

Graves steadied Vale with a hand against his shoulder, holding eye contact for the briefest of moments, but it was enough to remind the King he was not in this alone. Eyes of the deepest of blues burned with some weighty, unnamed emotion as Graves gave a subtle nod, pulling Vale closer to his side.

A sigh fell from him, but in the quiet loudness of the room, Vale could scarcely hear it—only feel it as it escaped his lips.

He looked to the others, all standing tall and firm, not cowed by the pressing weight of heavy power, even if they all wanted to clap their hands over their ears and curl into a ball to make it all stop. They didn't. They couldn't.

For her, they would be vigilant.

Moonlight fell in soft, long beams against the floors, and Vale looked out toward the balcony. The moon was now at its peak. Midnight.

And under the cover of a cloudless, midnight sky in winter, everything changed.

So slowly, Vale might've missed if not for Azgorath's sharp intake of air.

Luella's hair… *changed*.

From the roots of her hair, curls of golden blonde turned to a soft, silky, startling white. As if her entire being was becoming leeched of all color, her skin grew slightly paler. It had already been close to sickly in appearance, but the faintest dots of freckles along her nose disappeared before their very eyes. As if a paintbrush was taken to her, changing things so subtly and slowly that you didn't even realize it until you stepped back and saw the entire picture.

Her hair was wholly white, and her skin was soft and pure and pale as if lit from within by a moonlit glow. Many things were the same—her softened cheekbones, the curve of her jaw, those luscious lips that Vale wanted to eat up, the fan of dark lashes that cast shadows under her eyes,

and the soft curve of her brow, a dark grey shade that framed her features perfectly.

Gods, she was resplendent.

The demon’s hand gripped Luella’s so fiercely Vale feared her bones would break under his unnatural strength.

Vale could only watch with rapturous awe as it all fell into place.

A glamor. They had been right.

The Princess was not a Solis fae…

He itched to touch, to feel her skin and see if that had been changed, too. Did it still have the same softness?

"White hair," Tharen breathed. The mage looked on the verge of passing out.

Bastian genuflected, palms resting on the surface of the bed. The tips of his fingers skimmed Luella’s elbows like he was afraid to touch. "Pale skin." His voice was barely audible.

Vale knew what manner of fae she was—they all did.

She just had to open those beautiful eyes to cement it.

"She’s magnificent." Vale couldn’t stop staring at her.

The light of the moon grew thinner, slipping down to the other side of the castle as it dipped past its peak. Slowly, it disappeared, then grew hidden from their view, leaving only the faintest light from the golden, flickering flames and the many stars that speckled the inky night sky.

The air was still, and it was quiet.

And they all crowded around her, waiting.

Vale sat heavily on the edge of the bed, taking her in as he swallowed. "Look at her. *Feel* her. You feel it?" The call in his soul was ever-present but stronger as if a blanket draped atop it had been removed. "Will she feel us, too?"

Graves kept a hand on Vale’s shoulder, staring down at Luella. "I hope," he mumbled. "And I hope it drives her mad."

"Madder than she drove us," Tharen teased softly.

A smirk played upon the King’s lips. Yes, madder than that call drove them. He hoped it would gnaw at her, not let her get any sleep. Then, she would see what sort of agony they had lived in for the past centuries as they waited for her.

Azgorath’s head suddenly shot up. "Her fingers twitched." His voice was awed; he hadn’t let her hand go the entire time.

Vale was jealous at the show of intimate weakness—to rely on someone like that, he couldn’t imagine it.

He studied Luella’s face, waiting for any sign she would awaken.

"Open your eyes," Vale murmured.

Graves’s fingers dug into Vale’s shoulder, but he did not say another word as they all waited.

Bastian inhaled sharply, fingers moving across the bed to rest on her stomach, right over the space below her breasts. His palm flattened, and his eyes closed, following that tether between them.

Touch.

Vale startled. His dragon had been silent since the change. But now, he felt only a sharp desire to touch her. A need unlike any other.

His hands shook as he reached out, placing a hesitant palm against the side of her neck. She felt cool, similar to Bastian. Not as cold as the vampire’s skin, of course, but still with a chill that was different from before. His hand skimmed up before he finally caressed her soft cheek.

Still soft.

She felt the same. She was still soft and enticing.

Like his touch went past the barrier of her skin and burrowed deep into her mind, Vale watched Luella’s brows furrow, a tiny line between them as her features scrunched up. The corner of her mouth twitched. Her eyes moved behind her lids.

And then, she opened her eyes.

Irises of deep, vibrant blue sleepily took him in.

Vale’s face was the first that Luella saw, and he was indescribably pleased by that.

She blinked slowly, features pinching in what looked like discomfort as she shifted.

"What—" Luella croaked. It was barely a sound, scratchy and low. Her pretty, pink tongue ran along her lips, wetting them as she tried again. "What happened?"

Azgorath lifted her hand to his lips and pressed tiny butterfly kisses along the back of it. "Lu," he breathed.

Luella looked at him, head lazily twisting on the pillow as he met his gaze. "Az?" she quietly asked. "What happened?"

It was then that she took them all in, beautiful, big, and vibrant eyes of blue meeting each and every gaze in the room, regarding how they all stood

around her. With every passing moment, her features grew more concerned.

She lifted a shaky hand to her head, fingers skimming over the strands of pure white—just out of her sight.

Tharen watched her unflinchingly, eyes burning with heat; she could only hold his piercing blue gaze for so long before she looked away. Graves gave her a promising half-smile, the scar on his lip tugging, and she lifted her other hand to settle on the one Bastian had pressed to her stomach, holding him to her.

Lastly, she met Vale’s eyes, and he made himself stay still at the sight of the unfamiliar blue. It would take time to get used to that.

And while Luella looked at Vale, his palm still cupping her cheek as they took each other in, he could only utter one damning proclamation that spoke of the change that had befallen her: "You’re a Luna fae."

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NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE

It was dark.

And Luella was cold.

"Hello," she called. Her voice echoed back to her, a faint ringing that bounced off of nothingness.

Ever-lasting darkness swirled all around her.

And it was there, in the heart of that deep darkness, that Luella saw the faintest glimmer of lights—*stars*.

She lifted her hands in front of her, her skin pale and shimmery like swaths of glitter had been dusted over her. In the midst of the darkness around her, she stretched up on her tiptoes, reaching for the speckles of stars that dotted the vastness of the galaxy that she had found herself in.

But it was no use. No matter how hard she tried, she could not touch them, only look upon their faint glow.

She was trapped. Knew nothing but the dark.

A heavy silence weighed on her.

What did she remember? *Remember*… Memories. Nothing at all.

Fear, that was one. A slight pain in her arm, feeling lost and cold. But she still felt lost and cold.

What had happened to her?

Luella looked down. She felt fuzzy—heavy and light, all at once.

Smoothing a hand over her stomach and down her hips, Luella felt her body's firmness. Everything felt normal under her hands, but as she looked

up—*looked around*—she saw the undeniable truth that she was in a place that was anything but normal.

Endless darkness, broken up by the threads of gold, specks of stars, and glittering stardust floating from their light high above.

"Where is the place?" Her voice rang out into nothing, and nothing answered.

So, she walked.

Luella put one foot in front of the other. Walking, walking, walking.

Her body did not grow tired, and her memories did not return, only the faintest mirage of feelings that tickled against her skin as her mind reached toward remembrance.

A shooting star whizzed past her, and Luella gasped, a hand fluttering to her lips in awe. Though she could not touch, she could feel. She felt the whirl of the air as it shot through the sky and the faintest feeling of scorching heat against her chilled skin as it swirled by her.

"Woah," she breathed, the sound stolen by nothing and everything.

That shooting star whirled closer, exploding into a burst of gilded white dust.

Dust that floated right toward her.

Luella stumbled back, feet tripping over nothing by air and darkness. She cowered, hands coming up to cover her face as she flinched away from the assault of starry beauty.

"No!" Luella's voice echoed back to her, a chorus of *no*'s ringing all around.

Air whispered over her skin, but nothing else happened.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and unfurled her limbs where they were scrunched up around her, protecting her as best she was able.

Her eyes widened at the floating stardust before her. A swirling mass, bobbing to and fro like it was sentient, almost.

"My gods," Luella uttered. She was never one for cursing; her mother would have killed her if she heard her use the name of the gods in vain. But just this once…

The cloud of stardust tilted in the air, the edges shifting and swirling as if amused by her.

It was crazy, she knew, but she was out of options. That's why she spoke to it. "Do you know where I am?"

The stardust merely bobbed in the air.

"Right, of course. You can’t understand me." Luella gave a laugh that bordered on hysterical. "This is utterly unfathomable. W-where am I?"

She lifted her hands as if demanding the dark nothing around her for the answers she sought.

But an answer did not come from the darkness but from the stardust.

Warmth tickled against her outstretched palm, and Luella resisted the urge to jerk it back. The cloud of the stardust shifted shape, reaching toward her in the visage of a hand. With a gradual touch, the cloud of stardust took her palm. It tickled, and it was warm, and Luella felt a giddiness bubble up within her.

Her lips stretched into a full-blown smile, one she hadn’t given in quite some time. As her cheeks stretched, it felt foreign on her face.

"Hello there." Luella laughed.

Perhaps the stardust was alive. It certainly acted like it.

The hand made of stardust tugged her, and Luella stumbled forward a step. "Where are you taking me?" she questioned.

The rest of the cloud of shimmering stardust shifted to the side, caressing her shoulders and enveloping her in what felt like the warmest of hugs.

She was too swept up in the ethereal oddity of it all that she didn’t notice the change until it was upon her. The darkness dissipated, the clouds roiled, and the light of the stars was snuffed out. A startled scream froze on her lips, and Luella was thrust into a swirl of movement as everything rushed around her.

Quick as a flash of lightning streaking through the sky, the maelstrom of movement ceased.

Luella tumbled to her hands and knees gracelessly, and the cloud of stardust dissipated like smoke, leaving her bereft of warmth.

"What?" she managed to choke out, incredulous.

Luella sat up, golden hair tumbling around her shoulders as she took in her new surroundings.

A forest.

But not just any forest.

The Silva Noctis.

Her breath froze in her icy lungs.

"Why am I back here?" Luella fearfully asked.

Leaves rustled on the tall trees, and the familiar blanket of old, brittle pine crunched under her as she stood, dusting off her knees with her palms.

Shadows yawned in the nooks between trees and odd, jagged rocks, and Luella whimpered at the sight, heart kicking up to a frightening pace in her chest as the shadows took form, extricating from their hiding spots and drifting forward with spindly arms.

Bottomless pits of white for eyes. An amorphous cloud of pure evil. Teeth breaking through the shifting mass of deep shadows.

Fear made her unmoving.

But when the wraith stretched in midair, expanding to five times Luella's size, those familiar, ghastly clicking noises emitted from the hollow of its mouth.

And Luella finally broke free of the stupor she had found herself in and bolted.

She was not quick enough.

Goosebumps erupted on her exposed arms, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Her breath was labored as she fled, dodging low-hanging branches and ankles twisting on brittle pinecones and rocks. Hopping over dips in the ground, Luella prayed for a miracle.

For the stardust to come back and save her.

Just as Luella had the thought, her face slammed into something hard and unforgiving, and she fell back onto her haunches. Scrambling backward, she cowered against the base of the large tree that had caused her to fall. The wraith trilled in front of her, looking nearly right at her. Those soulless, hungry eyes paused where she was curled on the ground, and then something strange happened—the shadows quivered in the air, and the wraith's white eyes looked right over her.

Luella's hands shook as she pressed her palm to her mouth, knees pulled to her chest as she forced herself smaller, but the wraith did not lunge like she expected. Clouds of darkness undulated before her, and the edges of the shadow blurred as they swept right near Luella. A fearful noise escaped her, but the creature did not move.

Then, all of a sudden, the dark image wavered in the dim light, and the wraith's form broke up, disappearing back into the shadows from whence it

came.

And Luella was unharmed.

"How…" she breathed, voice wavering from her brush with the creature.

Slowly, she unfurled her limbs and stood, a hand pressed to the tree behind her to steady herself.

The wraith had looked right past her as if the creature hadn’t even noticed her.

Luella shook her head, taking a hesitant step away from the security of the tree, and a memory hit her with the weight of a battering ram.

"My ankle!" Luella’s eyes widened. She sat down and carefully removed her boot. Pale fingers pressed against her unmarred skin. No bruising, no swelling.

What?

The memory of her twisted ankle lingered in her mind, but yet, when she searched for the evidence, she found none.

Luella recalled running in the Silva Noctis. Az had been there. Her ankle had twisted; the memory of the pain gripped her, and she winced. Everything after that was still fuzzy.

Had it even been real?

Something was strange about this place… about her, perhaps...

The wraith had ignored her, her ankle was uninjured, and she had no idea how the stardust had sent her here.

Luella laced her boot back up and stood, fortifying herself as best as she was able as she rolled her shoulders back and set her jaw with a grim determination.

Something wasn’t right here.

She felt almost… trapped.

And she *would* escape.

Exhaling, Luella continued her trek.

"Stupid place. Stupid wraiths," Luella muttered to herself as she walked.

She kicked rocks out of her way and purposefully stepped on branches, hearing the loud *snap* as they broke under her boots.

But she was left alone. No wraiths came to attack her the noise. It was as though she was a ghost.

She let out a long sigh, stepping over a fallen tree. Everything in this stupid forest looked the same. It felt like she was walking in circles.

Pine and shadows; barren deciduous and full evergreens; spindly limbs and jagged rocks. She was sick of it—so sick that fear had long since left her.

In her walking, she had seen more wraiths than she had ever thought possible, and each one swept right past her as if she, too, were a cloud of inconsequential shadows.

However, that meant she didn’t have to be so careful as she walked, and Luella took full advantage of her new-found imperviousness. Clomping along with ire, she cursed the stardust for dropping her here.

A particularly large collection of dense cedar trees stood up ahead, and Luella curiously ventured forward. It’s not like she had anything else to do, after all.

The leaves were so thick she couldn’t see through. A natural barrier.

Head tilting, her hair brushed the small of her back as she looked up to the towering, pointed tops of the green trees. The foliage was dense, and Luella felt a strange urge to see what was on the other side.

Without giving it too much thought, she pushed her hand against the lower hanging branches; leaves parted under her touch, but not without scratching her wrists and arms as she poked through. The barrier made by the collection of trees was not thin, and her arm disappeared into the inside. Her sleeves snagged against abrasive limbs.

Pulling her arm back, she realized that wouldn’t work. "There has to be another way."

She bent down, peering underneath the trees. The bottom part was thinner, just small enough that she could squeeze through.

"Okay, I can do this." Luella tried to imbue herself with confidence.

She lay down on the forest floor, pine sticking through her clothes and poking at her stomach. She shimmied forward on her elbows, the top of her head brushing over the leaves. Inhaling the fresh, wonderous scent of tree bark and freshly fallen leaves, Luella let her mind stay on that one positive thing, even while her jaw clenched as she dragged herself over the thick bed of pine. A few spiderwebs stuck to her hair, and sweetgum and brittle pinecones pricked her forearms.

Bright rays of sunlight filtered through, and Luella chased it, pulling herself up to stand as she cleared the underside of the barrier of trees.

Ugh. She grimaced as she pulled a thick cobweb from the tangles of her hair.

Shaking her clothes out to rid herself of any bugs or pine needles, Luella's attention was captured by what lay on the other side of the barrier.

A cottage.

Her mouth parted with a gasp as she took in the small stone building. Nestled in the middle of a circle of towering trees. Lichen crawled up the side of the stone, and moss clung to the shutters, vines curling up the sides toward the roof, mingling with the leaves dangling from the thatched shingles.

How could a home be in the Silva Noctis?

Did anyone even live here?

Questions swirled within her mind, and Luella took steps forward to the windows, glass panes fogged over with condensation and dust. Swiping the back of her sleeve over the glass, the inside of the cottage revealed a dark, foreboding image.

Luella ducked, pressing her back to the stone side of the cottage, hoping she had not been seen peeping inside.

Slowly, she peeked up, fingers gripping the siding as only the top of her head and her eyes were visible.

A cloaked figure stood in the middle of the dark room, pulling books from shelves and moving them at will. The cottage was filled with books. A library, perhaps? Every wall was lined with old shelves, filled to the brim, and only a singular, robed figure moved within.

Light sparked from the center of the room, and the figure turned and shoved the hood of the dark cloak back, only to reveal a skeletal head with pure, white bone.

Her jaw dropped open in shock. What was this creature? She had never seen one like it before—or read of one like it.

Hollows which should have held eyes, and the nose was merely two holes etched into its skull. The mouth was toothless and held no lips. She could not tell what expression the creature was making, but as it turned to the window, and Luella crouched frozen, pinned under its stare, she could have sworn that it smiled.

She prepared herself to run, to dive back under the barrier of trees and take her chances with the wraiths. The evil you knew, after all…

But the skeletal creature merely nodded, bony head bobbing once on its spine. She watched the hard, little knobs of the vertebrae shift, a disgusted grimace twisting her lips downward. Facing the glowing orb of light in the middle of the room, the skeleton waved a bony hand, and just like that, a young male tumbled into being.

Luella watched with rapture as the male stood. Something about him looked so familiar to her.

He was younger, perhaps similar in age to her, and she saw no arched ears, only curving horns over long, wavy, dark brown hair. The ends of his hair tickled against his shoulders as his head whipped around, and Luella startled at the familiarity of his features—warm, amber eyes, a soft yet strong jaw, and tanned skin. *Az*.

It was undeniably Az, yet he looked younger than the male she knew. And his face was marred with blood and fresh cuts, evidence of a fight. Blood dribbled from a cut on his lip; dark, dried crusts of it were around his nose, and his cheek was bruised a horrific shade of blue and black. What had happened to him?

Luella watched as Az’s fists clenched, and before she could blink, he had a hand wrapped around the skeleton’s cloak.

"What the fuck?" Az’s voice was the rumbly tenor she remembered but not yet mature. Different.

Was this… Was this… the past?

Before she could ruminate on the thought any longer, four more figures stumbled out of the orb of light, one after the other, startled voices hissing out curses and accusations as they all wildly looked around in varying levels of shock.

Luella paled as she took them all in.

Golden hair and green eyes—King Vale stood tall and proud as he dusted off his coat, a haughty sneer on his lips. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle him. Luella was curious as she eyed the King. His jaw was less pronounced, his shoulders more slight in his youth, but the glint in his eyes was no less frightening. Even now, she wanted to cower back under its weight.

A shock of black hair framing pale skin. Bastian’s eyes were red-tinged, and as the young male snarled, two white fangs poked his bottom lip. He

was without his usual swirls of delicate tattoos, and in his ears, only a simple silver ring, not at all like the many glittering rings and jeweled stones she knew him to wear. The buttons on his shirt were askew, and he looked a fearsome, angry thing—not like the impervious, flirty male she recalled. The vampire was less put-together in his youth. She watched as the King grabbed the back of Bastian's shirt to stop him from charging the skeleton.

White hair, not quite the length of the mage she knew, and not tied back in his signature braids, it flowed free around his shoulders, and his tanned skin was etched with only a few blockish tattoos. Tharen still looked wild as he stood, icy eyes sparking and bloodied knuckles whitening as he curled his hands into fists, legs widening as he prepared to strike. The hollows of his cheeks were more pronounced, but the sharp angles of his face were softer in youth.

And Graves. The raven shifter wore simple black pants and a half-unlaced shirt, the purple stone of his amulet gleaming like a beacon on the strip of exposed skin at his chest. She held back a gasp at the sight of his face without a scar. He was breathtaking. The male was attractive with the scar, but without it, he looked more like some regal prince than a shadowed, lethal knight. His deep blue eyes were soft, saddened. His lips were downturned at the corners as though he had just experienced something sorrowful.

Graves's head swung her way, staring right at her frightened face, where it poked over the edge of the windowsill. She couldn't duck in time, and their eyes met. Or did they?

Nothing registered on the raven shifter's face, his eyes skimmed right past her like he did not even see her.

Boldened, Luella straightened, now in full view. No one spoke to her. No one looked at her. She was a ghost.

With hesitancy slowing her steps, she rounded the side of the stone wall and stood before the door. It creaked open under the brush of her palm, and in what could only be nothing other than a memory of the past, nestled somewhere between life and death, change and truth, Luella entered the cottage.

A clammer of voices rang all around.

"What the fuck am I doing here?" Bastian seethed.

Az wiped the blood off of his face, smearing it across his cheek. "What do you want with us?"

Graves was the only one who was quiet; morose as he stood between Bastian and King Vale, the former looked ready to rip the skeleton apart with his teeth and hands, while the latter cast a cursory glance about the room, poised and contained.

"It’s obvious, is it not?" King Vale didn’t appear frightened in the least, but excitement clouded his face, making him appear wild. "We’re in the lair of the Fates."

All noise ceased.

The skeleton—*a Fate,* Luella couldn’t believe it—gave a jerky nod, a bony finger waving as the orb of light glowed brighter.

The Fate spoke. "You are here to stand testament to the beginning of the end." Its voice was neither male nor female but so powerful that Luella’s hair stood on end from the lofty weight imbued within the creature’s words.

"Salvation or destruction. It is your choice." Hollowed-out eye sockets stopped right on Luella, where she was standing just inside next to the closed door. "And her choice."

She gulped. Even without eyes, the skeleton’s gaze froze her to her spot. It was looking at her, she knew without a doubt. And yet, the Fate did not appear to harbor any malice, just a careful sort of curiosity and urgency.

The others appeared struck dumb—save for the King—under the heavy importance filling the room like smoke. Even Luella felt intense pressure on her, making her mouth dry and head heavy. She walked further inside; the others paid no mind to the creak of the floorboards under her step.

Tharen broke the silence. "We haven’t heard from your kind in nearly a century. Why should we believe you?"

The Fate did not answer. Bony hands reached into the orb of light, procuring a book from within its midst. As the faint glow from the orb cast a shine on the cover, Luella stumbled back, nearly knocking into Bastian—who did not look her way, even as her breath fluttered against his arm.

The book.

It looked identical to the one she had found in the library with Nyx. *Compendium of Fates.* The purple cover was pristine, and its size was an exact match.

The Fate held the book out, white bones gripping the cover as it said, "The five of you have been chosen."

King Vale arched a brow, and even in his youth, the action held unshakable confidence. "Chosen? For what?"

"*To expel the dark, the shadow's spark, and defeat the stolen, she must bond with the chosen*." The Fate tore a page from within the book, holding it with reverence as it raised the book higher. It erupted into a glimmer of light, tendrils swirling through the air and disappearing back into the orb.

The prophecy.

It all made sense now.

And Luella knew exactly where that book would end up. And who would stumble upon it nestled in the depths of a forgotten library…

Too much. *Too much.*

Her head hurt.

Azgorath's hands shook, and Luella noted the blood on his knuckles, the bruises littering his skin. She walked behind him, trailing a ghostly hand near his back and over his chest. She looked right up into his eyes, begging him to *see* her.

"Az?" Luella whispered. He looked above her, focus trained on the Fate.

She reached down to grip his hand, to finally touch him and break this strange spell.

Like smoke, her hand went right through him.

"No." Luella tried again. "No, no, no."

Again. Again.

And again.

Each time, her hand passed through him. She couldn't touch him. Her lip quivered.

The roaring in her head drowned out their talking, but she didn't care.

"I want to get out of here," Luella said. "I don't understand what's happening."

She turned to Bastian and attempted to tug on his shirt sleeve, unable to grasp it. "Bastian? I want to go—" She stopped herself. The word *home* lingered unsaid in the air.

But where *was* home?

She was spiraling.

Luella sniffed, eyes burning as she waved her hands in front of Graves's face. She stood on her tiptoes and even tried to grab his amulet… Her

fingers swept right through the stone. No use.

She would even take Tharen’s attention at this point. Her clutched fists swept through the mage’s white hair as she tried to pull on it, rouse him from the conversation with the Fate. His lips moved heatedly, but she could barely hear over the panic clawing within her chest.

Finally, Luella turned to King Vale.

It felt odd to call him by his title when he appeared younger than she remembered him.

With slow steps, Luella stood before him, hands hovering over his chest. "Please?" Her voice quaked.

And then, she bridged the scant amount of space between them. Luella’s hands glided right through the King’s chest.

The sob she had been holding back finally escaped her, and Luella turned in a slow circle, taking them all in.

She came to a stop right before the Fate, who tilted its head down to rest vacant hollows right on her. Desperation burned through her, escaping into the air with every short puff of breath leaving her lungs.

"You can see me?" she asked.

Luella had thought but hadn’t been sure—she didn’t know if it was a good thing to be seen by the Fate or not.

The Fate nodded. "I see all."

"What about them?" She jerked her head to the others.

"No. They cannot see you here," the Fate said.

Graves gave a quiet mumble behind her, and Bastian replied with a soft, "I don’t know."

"Who are you talking to?" Luella heard King Vale’s booming voice and turned. His eyes were narrowed into slits as he questioned the Fate.

"Someone of profound importance," the Fate replied. "Someone you will come to know… and have."

A litany of questions filled the room, curious and furious as the inquiries swarmed around her.

The Fate turned its attention back to Luella. "It’s time for you to go now."

As soon as the words were uttered, she was forced back by an invisible wind, stumbling, stumbling, heels digging into the floor to stop it, but Luella was forced against the door. It swung open with a wave of the Fate’s hand, and Az shouted in confusion from the slam.

It closed with a resounding boom, Luella outside the confines of the Fate’s lair once more.

She banged her fists against the wood, screaming, "Let me in! Answer me!" *Bang*. "Tell me how to get out of this place!" *Bang*.

Her pounding grew fainter as her arms tired. Luella pulled her swollen and bloodied fists back, clutching them to her chest.

Head hung low, her hair cascaded over her shoulders. Tears tracked down her cheeks.

Something brushed against her nape. Soft brushes over her chilled skin, sweeping against her cheeks.

Luella jerked her head up, turning quickly.

Only to be met by a sight that made a strange relief wash over her.

The stardust was back!

"Oh," she breathed. Her voice was thick with tears.

Swirls of purple and black brushed over her cheeks, warming her skin. She hadn’t realized how terrible it felt to be ignored. Hadn’t realized how much she yearned for touch and connection until it had been taken from her —*again*.

Raised without soft, casual touches, Luella had never expected to rely so much on them. Not until she had lived with Az’s careful hands, stroking down her arms, or even Bastian’s cool touch against her cheeks, and Graves tucking her hair behind her ear with gloved fingers.

She tried not to think about King Vale’s palms resting on her waist as he spun her about the ballroom. Or Tharen’s hand gripping the base of her throat with a barely controlled possessive anger.

Luella carded a hand over the wispy stardust, and at the first brush of her fingers against it, her feet were swept out from under her. And again, she fell through…

Nothingness.

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GLIMPSES...

"What do you dream of?"

She knew that voice.

Az. Her sweet demon.

You, Luella wanted to say.

She screamed, but the sound was trapped in her mind.

I dream of you.

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58
...YEARNING

"Wake up."

Luella wanted to. Oh, how she wanted to.

But no matter how hard she tried, she could not open her eyes.

The gruff yet regal tone, she could clearly make it out. But what surprised Luella was not the fact that King Vale wanted her to awaken but the fact that his hand was caressing her cheek with such soft adoration that it made the back of her eyes sting with tears.

She felt his warm touch against her cold skin, and she yearned to lift her hand and hold him to her.

Luella heard his pleas. She heard them all.

A collection of deep voices, whispered promises and sorrows over her still body—reverberating through that ache in her soul as she cried out inside, desperate to answer.

It was like being in the fires of the Below, Luella mused. To listen but unable to respond.

"Soon." The unmistakable tone of Tharen’s voice as he gave a sharp reply.

King Vale’s fingers stilled against her. "How soon?"

A moment of silence before Tharen uttered, "The Fates are never wrong."

The Fates.

Visions of white bones assaulted her, and Luella wanted to crawl away from it, scared.

A memory of the piece of past Luella had been granted… What would they all say if she told them what she had seen?

If only she could open her eyes.

The darkness of sleep drowned her again, and this time, Luella went willingly.

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THE AWAKENING

Something yawned within her, stretching as if awakening from a deep sleep.

Luella felt her fingers first.

A tiny twitch of her pinky as she tried to lift her hand.

Then, the feeling came back slowly to her body. But as a sharp pain radiated from her arm and chest, she wished all feeling would stay far, far away.

Her brow scrunched as she tried to open her eyes, but her lids were so heavy that Luella gave up. For now.

Voices washed over her. Softly gruff. Warm and comforting. If she could have, she would've smiled from the overwhelming security she felt at the sound, but her lips did not even give the slightest of twitches.

Luella ached to move. To stretch her limbs and find the source of that strange pain deep in her gut. It was sore, like an unused muscle that had suddenly been strenuously worked.

Even her head pounded from the force of the hurt.

Something was pulling her, but she could not follow the call.

It was only when warm fingers gripped hers that she forced herself to work past the aching exhaustion weighing her down, and she slowly turned her head. Something soft was under her.

The hand gripping hers tightened.

"Open your eyes."

That voice. She knew that voice.

King Vale.

In her tired stupor, Luella could only think one thing: *why did he sound so harrowed?*

The anguish in the King's voice. Was that for… her?

A hand pressed against her breastbone, traveling lower and lower to settle right over that pulsing ache in her gut.

Another touch on her cheek, and Luella turned her head toward it.

If only she could just open her eyes to see who touched her so sweetly. It had to be Az, right? The demon was the only one who treated her with such reverence.

It was that soft warmth on her cool skin that did it. As if the one caressing her cheek held the string that was tied to her soul and tugged, forcing her up out of the strange pit of hollow, hazy wakefulness she had found herself in.

Luella was pulled from the depths of her mind all at once, and slowly, she opened her eyes.

Faces peered down at her.

Luella let out a weak groan. Her vision was blurry, her head throbbed, and her arm hurt. But no ache was so fierce as the one in her soul.

Soft inhalations of surprise made her wince, her eyes squeezing shut.

The hand against her cheek did not move, and that was what made her blink her eyes open, the desperate urge to see who had pulled her from that strange state.

Golden blonde hair tousled as it fell over striking, green eyes. Blonde stubble shadowed a regal jawline. And a mouth that was parted with shock. Luella stared at that mouth, her thick tongue wetting her dry lips as the ache inside her flared.

It was the King who touched her. The King who held the other end of that invisible string.

"What—" Luella's voice was weak, and her mouth was dry. It hurt to talk. Her lips were chapped as she, again, ran her tongue along them in a feeble attempt of wetting them.

She needed water. Craved it with a sudden desperation. Everything was too much. The fibers of the sheets scratched against her skin.

"What… happened?"

Her hand was lifted in a warm, strong grip. Sweet, wet kisses pressed against the back of it. With every brush of lips against her skin, the ache in her soul eased ever so slightly.

Scrunching up her brow, Luella turned her head lazily on the pillow, meeting the eyes of Az, who gripped her hands with a delicate passion.

"Lu," Az breathed.

She sighed at the sound of his voice. Even as her mind whirred from the memories inside her—the same demon, with bruises on his skin and blood welling from a split lip. The same hands that gripped hers had been cracked and bloody. The voice he used to say her name had been angrier, yet the gruff edges she knew now hadn’t been quite as mature.

Blinking the memory away, Luella relished in the feel of his skin against hers. Anything to quell the fiery ache in her gut. Bastian’s thumb brushed back and forth over her stomach, and she swallowed.

"Az? What happened?"

At the strange look on the demon’s face, Luella tore her gaze away from his—it was painful, but as she looked around, meeting the concerned faces of the others, she grew wary.

A pounding throb in her head made her wince, and she lifted a weak hand to her temple to rub it. The action made her hair fall into her eyes, and Luella brushed it away.

Tharen stared at her with heat in his gaze, and she gulped from the burning intensity. The ache inside her pulled her in many different directions, and her feet kicked out under silken sheets from the force, stretching as if to ward off the uncomfortable soreness. Graves stood quietly behind King Vale, and her mind was bombarded with the memory of how the pair had pulled Bastian away from the Fate.

They had worked together once and had been more friendly than they appeared now.

What had happened to them?

Bastian’s hand never failed in its soothing caress, and before she could think of the many ways it wasn’t a good idea, Luella pressed a shaking hand against his, trapping his palm against her. The vampire’s sensuous lips parted as he stared at her, and she felt her cheeks pinken.

She looked to Graves; the scar at the corner of his mouth tugged as he gave a half-smile. Luella halted in her perusal of the room, ensnared by the sight of him.

His smell. Cloves and honey. It was stronger than before, like he had doused himself in the most enticing of colognes.

Rolling her head to the side on the pillow, King Vale’s hand tightened on her cheek. His palm was so warm. She sighed as his unique scent of crackling embers sank into her skin. What she wouldn’t give to crawl inside him and never leave…

Even though he killed her family, slaughtered thousands, and stole her freedom… Even then. She was enticed by him. By all of them. And so sick of running away from the call.

She could be selfish, just this once.

Luella closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek into the King’s palm, her movements languid with exhaustion and waves of pain. A grimace tugged at her lips, and she shifted on the mattress from the gnawing feel of something pulling her in different directions, making her soul fracture from the forcible tugging.

What was it that pulled her so frantically from the other end of those threads?

The King stared deeply into her eyes, and Luella couldn’t bring herself to look away.

His mouth opened, unsaid words hovering in the air between them like he couldn’t believe his eyes. Fear of the unknown gripped her.

The silence broke, and King Vale spoke.

"You’re a Luna fae."

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THE BEGINNINGS OF A TEMPEST

The earth called to her.

Bare feet sunk into the lush grass. Evening dew drops clung to the fronds, tickling her toes and dampening the hem of her gown.

The air was crisp and fresh, but there was a tang of something heavy and thick lying underneath it. The scent of lightning bolts and seafoam, metallic and clean, humid and teeming with promise. It clung to her hair and dripped off of her bare arms.

The gardens were full and vibrant, even though the nip of winter was in full force. Luella bent down and ran a pale finger over the edge of a white rose. Her fingertips tingled, her soul swelling like she had taken the first breath of fresh air in her entire existence.

"So pretty," Luella uttered. "Untouched by lies."

She wanted to be a rose, too. Forever blooming, even while the seasons changed and the air grew still and frigid. Never wilting.

A thick swallow made her throat clench. She wouldn’t cry. Not anymore. Luella did not have space for tears. Only a grim acceptance and heartbreaking resentment.

They had lied.

All of them had.

Even her Az…

She resented their secrets. The lies and deceit that she still didn’t quite understand.

Luella knew she had a powerful magic. A fact that would have been evident without their words. She could feel it inside her, taste it in the air, and sense it all around her. And she *belonged* to them—as Tharen had so crudely phrased it.

She still hadn't shared what she saw in her sleep: the Fate's lair—a secret she would keep to herself for now. She could play their game of deceit.

As evening shadows fell over the gardens, Luella shivered. She would be the destroyer of shadows and darkness, they had told her. But how could Luella save anyone when she couldn't even save herself?

The Tenebrae, the darkness that plagued the kingdoms, infected those with his shadows, the Umbra, who would do his bidding. Bastian had told her the Tenebrae took over Luna, her ho—

"*No*," Luella said aloud, knowing that *they* could hear her. "That place is not my home. It never was, and it never will be." Her fingers clutched the stem of the rose, and she did not even flinch as the thorn pierced the tip of her thumb.

A small, peculiar smirk stretched her pink lips. "Good." She watched red blood bead on the tip of her too-pale finger, a small trail that dribbled down her wrist.

Let the pain remind her.

Luella's home was nowhere and everywhere. But not Luna. Even though she looked in the mirror and saw the image of a Luna fae staring back at her, Luella felt no kinship with them. In her mind, she was still the golden-haired and golden-eyed shunned Princess of Solis. Not the pale heirus that stared back at her. One with white hair and blue eyes filled with sorrow.

Standing, Luella gave one last glance at the beauty of the rose before turning her head back to the confines of the castle. The walls stood tall and unmarred by the destruction of battles past. The grand glass doors to the throne room were cracked open, like the five bodies within could not stand to be without her in their vicinity.

They were all there. All watching her.

Luella tried to ignore their prying eyes, even while the threads within her tugged and tugged.

She could almost see them. Five golden chains of the most delicate weave twined around her soul, leading to five different males that stood

within the palace.

Their silhouettes were visible, five forboding impressions.

Though Luella couldn’t make out their expressions, she knew from the evening glow of the sun behind her that they could see her every movement. Every shift of her face as she stared at them, the slow rise of anger that made her brows turn down, the vibrant and unnatural shade of blue that shone like beacons in the dimming light, the gales of wind that whipped her stark white hair around her pale face and fluttered the hem of her dark green gown.

Her arms were bare. The gauzy material fell in open sleeves on either side; the neckline scooped low, revealing the way her chest rose and fell with every sharp inhalation as she desperately ignored the ache in her soul, the tug in her belly that led her up the stone path, right to the cracked open glass doors.

They were always watching her, and no matter how hard she tried to ignore them, Luella couldn’t.

It had been five days since she had awoken, and not once had she been left alone.

But yet, Luella had never felt more alone than she did now.

The hands that smoothed down the ruffled skirt of her gown were a strangers, the eyes that stared back at hers in the mirror were unfamiliar, and the hair she brushed and combed with hesitant touches was not the usual shade of golden blonde.

And the stirring of magic within her was the most unusual of all. Something had awakened inside her. Something she still didn’t understand.

Luella only knew she felt an intense call to… *everything*.

A low-hanging branch brushed the crown of her head like the soothing touch of a friend, and the tumultuous feelings inside her were quelled slightly.

Everything had changed, and the grandest change had been her.

One of the shadows shifted behind the glass, and the door creaked open further, a tall, imposing figure stepping out onto the beginnings of the courtyard.

She squinted, trying to see who it was. As the male stepped forward, Luella could make out the faintest image of a crown—King Vale then, come to call her back to her cage.

Luella scowled, refusing to answer his silent beckoning. Even as the thread tugged her toward him. She almost had to dig her heels into the ground to stop herself from going to him. From going to all of them.

She felt them deep inside her, could smell the faint twinge of their scents mingling in the air and urging her into their arms, coupled with that roaring swirl of power within her, and Luella felt torn into little pieces—may as well be scattered in the wind.

Ignoring the King’s summons, Luella ventured further into the gardens. Rose bushes, stone benches, and curving pathways made of dirt and rock turned to a dense canopy overhead, with the sweet scent of apples doing fairly little to block out the enticing scent calling her back to the castle.

The air darkened around her as she entered the copse of trees.

And Luella let herself *breathe*.

That once vacuous hole of nothing, now filled with pieces of everything. Relishing in the grass under her toes and the rustle of wind through the air, every breath taken filled her lungs fully.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, but when the length of the threads within her grew smaller, and gravel crunched under heavy, booted feet, a slow exhale rocked through her. The disruption of quiet made her angry, that storm of everything inside her knocking against its cage.

"You cannot even leave me alone for this long?" Luella asked, not bothering to turn and face them.

"Come back inside," the King said—demanded, rather. Luella knew King Vale did not merely *ask* for things.

"Not yet," she whispered. "Just let me exist here for a while longer." She refused to beg.

A sharp gust of air carried the scent of rich bergamot to her; she wasn’t surprised when Bastian spoke. "You’re bleeding."

Rubbing her pricked thumb on the skirt of her gown, Luella ignored him. She hoped the scent of her blood made him as desperate and hungry as she felt.

The wind kicked up, ruffling her hair around her. White strands whipped as thunder cracked in the distance.

A storm was coming.

"Inside," Tharen barked.

She wanted to turn, wanted to look at them so badly. The rapacious need inside her hadn’t stopped since she had awoken. It had only gotten worse

every time Luella denied herself.

Leaves rustled, and Luella could *feel* the countless fronds of grass giving way as boots stomped without care. A heavy presence hovered behind her, and crisp snow stung her nostrils.

"When we ask you to do something, you do it."

Then, Luella turned. She allowed herself to look up at Tharen with all the sorrow she felt, unfettered emotion shined in her bright blue eyes. "I know." She swallowed down the tears. "You own me now, and I won’t be able to escape you."

The mage seemed as burdened as she felt. His jaw was still unshaven, and his eyes had grown wilder with every passing day Luella denied the call to fall into their arms. The bond that tied them all together, forcing her to find solace in their touches when all she wanted was to run far, far away.

Wind roared, rustling through the canopy of trees in the orchard, and she was glad. The tempest was as wild as she felt inside. Maybe it came from her—after all, she *was* powerful.

A loud caw made Luella’s head whip up toward one of the branches above Tharen’s head.

An inky black raven with eyes of the deepest of blues stared back at her. The feathers mingled with the shadows, just as she knew the male’s hair and cloak would have.

Luella hummed and quietly uttered, "You always watch me."

The raven rustled his wings in response.

Four.

Four were here.

That left one unaccounted for.

Not gone, just out of sight. Az was the most protective of her, especially so since she had awoken. He was never far from her.

It was the demon who had hurt her the most. An ever-present sting that throbbed in her heart.

The King stepped closer, hand raised as if he wished to touch her. "It’s going to storm."

"I know, King Vale." She met his eyes.

"Call me Vale. You belong to us." The King paused. "I will not have you call me the same as everyone else like you are below me."

That crown on his head, Luella wanted to knock it off. "But am I not?" She arched a brow. "Below you?"

At that, the King did not respond.

He knew she was right. He wanted to forget. To sweep away the ways he had manipulated her. *Used* her.

But Luella would never forget. Every time she took some pleasure in going against them however she could, she reminded them of that fact.

"We may be *Vincire*," she sneered the word, unused to its sound on her tongue. "But I do not have to do anything I don’t want to do. You say you want me?"

Luella stepped closer, ignoring the way Bastian’s nostrils flared at the scent of her dried blood that clung to her finger and left a small, red stain on her gown. The raven hopped along the branch, a strong gust of wind making the stark black feathers rustle much like her stark white hair—two different beings. They would never work.

King Vale stared down at her, and Luella *touched*.

As she placed a palm on his chest, the thread snapped, and she bit her lip—*hard*—to stifle the pleased sigh that threatened to tumble from her and give her away. She may act impervious to their bond, but it chipped away at her walls with every passing moment.

If she stayed with them, forced to endure their placating words and touches and scent, she knew one day she would give in. It was the knowing that made her so resentful.

She tilted her head back to look up into his eyes—bright blue met deep green. She saw his throat bob and knew it was because he wasn’t yet used to the change; the glamor forced upon her by some unknown being had dropped away and left her changed. But at least she wasn’t the only one reeling.

"You will never have me," Luella hissed.

The slight vulnerability that had shone in his eyes shuttered at her words, leaving a cool and calculated cruelty that she had come to know so intimately.

King Vale stepped away from her, breaking their sole point of contact. Her hand fell to her side, and she watched the King turn and head back to the castle. "Come inside," he called, not even bothering to look over his shoulder like she was of no importance to him.

It hurt.

Tharen shot her a look, his eyes like ice chips as they pinned her to the spot, before he, too, went inside.

He would not beg either, then.

The threads inside her grew taut as they lengthened, and she rubbed her chest as she watched them go.

Bastian stood silently, quietly. Where was the playfully sensual vampire?

"Luella, please. Come inside. It’s cold out, and the storm is approaching." Bastian stayed rooted to his spot, and she was so grateful to him at that moment for not leaving her bereft and unmoored.

"Being outside, it helps," Luella revealed. She fisted the bodice of her gown. "It hurts so bad. All the time. I just want it to go a-away." A sob clawed against her chest, and she moved her hand up to rub over her breastbone to quell the sound. The ache in her soul was ever-present, and she felt it grow from his nearness.

The raven cawed overhead, and Bastian’s red-tinged eyes flicked up before he stepped closer. "Give in to us."

Luella stepped back. "*Never*."

Through the trees, Luella saw a shadow standing just outside the glass doors of the throne room. The candlelight inside illuminated the figure, revealing two curving horns poking above a head of unruly curls.

Bastian tracked her gaze. "He misses you."

And I miss him. The words were frozen on the tip of her tongue.

But how could she fall into the demon’s arms and let him whisper quiet words of comfort over her when those same lips had uttered such lies?

Thunder rumbled, growing closer with every passing moment. The air was thick with electricity and the promise of rain.

"Come inside," Bastian tried again.

Luella shook her head. "Don’t make me." The memory of his soft cheek under her lips made her pale cheeks pinken. The mark of the deal that bound her to him burned on her chest; she promised him a kiss and would have to follow through eventually. She stared at those sinfully lush lips and uttered a soft, "Please."

"Very well." Bastian stepped back, and the raven cawed in indignation at the vampire giving up. "Being out here, it helps you?"

"So much. The earth…" she trailed off. Words weren’t enough for what she felt. "Everything. It helps." Luella touched a hand to her stomach, just above her navel, and Bastian followed the movement with soft, almost

heartbroken eyes. "It hurts all the time—the only time it’s bearable is when I’m not trapped. When I’m free. Out here."

She didn’t include that freedom meant being away from their watchful eyes. He knew. It was just there, lingering under the surface of her candor.

"I’ll be inside." Bastian gave her one last lazy look. Committing her to memory, taking in all of her newness. "When you’re ready, pet. We’re waiting."

Somehow, the sobriquet didn’t make her as angry as it used to. When before it sounded possessive and demeaning, now it made something inside of her flutter like the delicate wings of a butterfly.

"Graves!" Bastian called. The raven fluttered his wings before hopping off his perch, lapis lazuli eyes boring holes into her as he flew away.

Just before Bastian breached the expanse of apple trees, Luella felt a heaviness inside her. Her mouth opened before she could think it through, words bubbling over. "Thank you," she whispered.

The vampire didn’t turn to look at her, but his fingers clenched by his side as he walked away, as if wishing he could turn around and hold her.

The orchard grew hushed in their wake. They weren’t gone, Luella knew. She could see them still… inside the throne room, watching her. Az was outside, sitting on the ground, head bent as he watched her. His pain called to her just like the forest did.

Thunder cracked, leaves rustled, and the sky burst with the perfect storm.

It was raining.

Water, falling from the sky.

It started off small. Little droplets hit the crown of her hair and plinked off the leaves before falling to the ground. But, like all powerful things, it quickly turned violent and unstoppable.

A deluge fell from the clouds above, soaking her head and deep green gown. The dress stuck to her frame, molding to the shape of her curves. Water glanced off her chest and arms, and she relished in the cold wetness on her skin. Her chest heaved as she sucked in air greedily. Luella couldn’t get enough.

It helped.

She didn’t lie to Bastian. Being outside, under the cover of trees and even higher still, under the cover of the sky, made something inside her calm.

The ache inside her swelled and swelled with every crack of thunder and drop of rain and swaying of the tree limbs. Until the magic within her couldn’t be contained any longer, the raging storm fed into her raging feelings, and her limbs shook with exertion as she tried to contain whatever it was that yearned to break free.

She… *loved* it.

The most pure and precious of smiles graced her lips.

This was her home. Not Solis. Not Luna. But here. Amid everything.

Great, fat drops pinged off of the top of the gazebo nearby, the metallic top clinging as it slid off the curved top and splattered to the ground. The ground grew muddy, stones turned dark grey, and her hair plastered to her forehead and shoulders, the pure white turning to a darker silver from the heavy wetness clinging to the strands.

Luella stayed utterly still and quiet amid the storm. Thunder boomed overhead, rattling the trees around her. The very ground under her bare feet seemed to quake, and birds squawked, seeking cover in the thick foliage overhead.

The appearance of water reminded Luella of the change inside her. Where magic was once gone, now filled to the brim, near bursting inside her.

She was so full that it hurt.

The way the elements seemed to swirl in her gut like an amalgamation of being nearly brought her to her knees.

Luella recited the line of the prophecy that they had shared with her shortly after she had awoken—the part that had been on the torn-away pages inside the Compendium and offered an explanation for the roaring mass of power that resided within her once magicless soul.

"*She will be one over all elements, the sun, and the stars*." The storm gobbled up her words, keeping her secret safe. But how long would that secret stay a secret? Luella feared what was coming.

And the call of the earth beat against her skin, wearing her down.

Could she resist it?

As the rainwater soaked her, Luella couldn’t help but feel this was only the beginning.

To be continued…

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Micah Nicole is a lover of words, dreams, and romance. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and lives in South Carolina, where she is pursuing a Master of Science in Psychology. When she's not reading or writing, Micah can be found spending time dreaming up story ideas with a cup of coffee or tea, or sometimes both! She's a secret hopeless romantic who loves the idea of love, but only if there are daggers and castles involved. In her past life, she likes to think she was a princess who spent her nights fleeing from her castle and going to taverns, and her days relaxing in gardens and attending balls, all in hopes she would someday meet her prince charming. She has a black cat named Tina, who loves to keep her company while she writes.

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